

MARCH 2024

Enhancing Engagement in Youth Development Programming

Background

Founded in 1978, Youth Action YouthBuild was established to provide young people from East Harlem (NYC) with valuable workforce skills while also helping them give back to their community. Over time, the YouthBuild program has expanded from a single location that carried out local housing rehabilitation projects to a vast network of YouthBuild programs across 15 countries. Collectively, the YouthBuild network engages tens of thousands of young people annually through various educational, workforce development, and community service opportunities.

Today, the Youth Action YouthBuild (YAYB) East Harlem facility is still highly regarded for its multifaceted approach to youth development. YAYB participants receive free GED preparation classes, biweekly stipends, training and certification in valuable career certifications (such as site safety, OSHA, and CPR), free finance and career development workshops, and the chance to earn an AmeriCorps scholarship for participating in community service.

However, since the COVID-19 pandemic, fewer youth have been attending and completing the programs. YAYB partnered with ideas42's NYC Behavioral Design Center (BDC) to identify the challenges and barriers that limit engagement and develop strategies to overcome them.

Identifying behavioral barriers to participation

To better understand the YAYB program model, participation requirements, and student engagement trends, we reviewed the organization's website, student handbook, outreach materials, and data from a participant feedback survey developed by the BDC.

With this background knowledge, we conducted a series of in-depth interviews with YAYB staff and both active and inactive students to learn more about their expectations and experiences participating in the YAYB program. This research helped us understand why participants join YAYB, what they hope to achieve, which program components they find valuable, and what areas could be improved.

Highlights

- Youth Action YouthBuild, an education and workplace training program, has faced declining attendance and program completion since COVID-19.
- We identified barriers hindering participation. Challenges included inaccurate expectations, lack of guidance, present struggles overshadowing long-term goals, and incomplete awareness of incentives.
- To address these, we developed a Journey Map, outlining program components and incentives. Other design recommendations include emphasizing benefits, celebrating progress, strengthening social accountability, and providing flexibility for missed sessions.
- In testing, students and staff expressed that the designs helped them understand the scope and expectations of the program.

During our interviews, students expressed enthusiastic appreciation for YAYB's teachers and other staff. They highlighted that the teachers created an atmosphere of safety, support, and motivation that helped many students rediscover the joy of learning. Students also acknowledged the various advantages of participating in the program, such as obtaining their GED, earning professional credentials, and learning valuable life skills. Lastly, students feel a strong sense of belonging at YAYB, with one interviewee sharing, "I love it there. That's why I wanted to come every day, because of my classmates."

Yet our interviews and survey responses also revealed several critical behavioral barriers that can lead participants to withdraw from the program. These barriers include:

- 1. Inaccurate expectations regarding program requirements.** We learned that most YAYB participants joined the program with the sole goal of obtaining their GED. Furthermore, many participants inaccurately believed that the YAYB program is primarily a GED preparation program and that the other program components are optional. This belief was most persistent at signup but also affected some students already partway through the program. These students often failed to engage with the program's workforce development and community service components, or disengaged from those components midyear.
- 2. Lack of guidance or transparency.** Several interviewees expressed concern about the lack of transparency in certain aspects of the YAYB program and felt that they did not have enough information about how to progress in certain program components. For example, some students did not know how to schedule a GED exam, while others did not understand why the internship pay they received was less than what they were expecting. Even though students are generally aware that the staff was available to answer their questions, students felt frustrated and they wished they had more information that would allow them to avoid misunderstandings or navigate these processes on their own.
- 3. Present struggles overshadow long-term goals.** Some young people who enroll in the YAYB program do so to achieve a goal that is valuable to them (e.g., getting a full-time, high-growth job so they can support their children). However, throughout the nine-month course, participants are bound to face unexpected challenges, such as difficulty mastering a particular subject or changes in their caregiving responsibilities. These challenges can overshadow their long-term goals, and lead them to hyperfocus on taking whatever actions can address their most pressing issues. This often results in students dropping out of a program component (or the program entirely) to free up some time or energy.
- 4. Incomplete awareness of program incentives.** YAYB provides various opportunities for students to earn financial rewards, ranging from daily attendance incentives to rewards for securing professional certifications and even a \$1,500 AmeriCorps Scholarship. When we mentioned these incentive payments during the interviews, participants noted that they are highly appealing and would likely motivate them to achieve more in the program. However, many were unaware of the full range of incentives available.

Designing to reset expectations

Journey Map

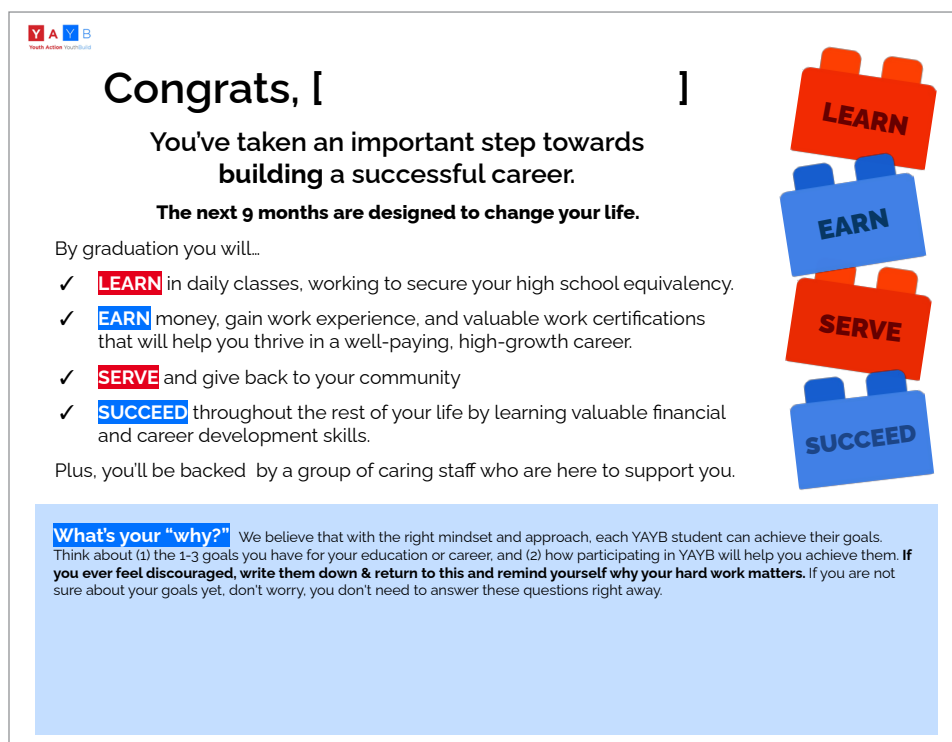
Based on our research and discussions with YAYB staff and students, we designed a “Journey Map” to help students play an active role in tracking their progress over the course of nine months, and encourage them to achieve program goals.

Designed to overcome the challenges summarized above, the Journey Map clearly and succinctly presents all of the program’s core components, along with the rewards and support resources available to students.

Page 1 (pictured belowⁱ) welcomes students to the program and introduces them to its core components:

- ▶ Learn (GED preparation)
- ▶ Earn (workforce readiness and internships)
- ▶ Serve (AmeriCorps volunteer service)
- ▶ Succeed (financial and career development)

The page concludes with a “What’s your why” activity, which prompts students to explain what they hope to accomplish in this program, thus helping them keep their long-term goals in mind.




ⁱ This and the following screenshots depict the print version of the Journey Map. The digital version is laid out vertically to be more readable on mobile devices.

Page 2 provides a more in-depth summary of the requirements of the Learn (GED preparation) component. This page encourages students to track their attendance—which also allows them to monitor their attendance incentive payments—and note when they have any upcoming GED exams scheduled. The page also lists staff contact information if students have questions or concerns about their academic progress.


LEARN Attendance is important. You'll receive a stipend every day you show up on time.
Each filled bubble = \$25

I attended class on these days...
Fill in the circle for each day you attended.


Why should I fill this out? Even though YAYB teachers take attendance, we encourage you to keep track of your own attendance streaks and double-check your records against YAYB staff's.




OCT




NOV



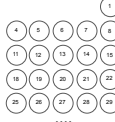
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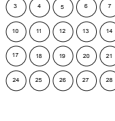
MAR



APR



MAY



JUN

Have a test scheduled?
List the date(s) and location(s) here:

Did you already pass a test? 🎉
Celebrate your success! Check off the tests you passed.

Language Arts date passed _____

Mathematics date passed _____


Science date passed _____

Social Studies date passed _____

On _____ I earned my GED. (+\$75)

Celebrate your efforts! Note the other ways you've grown as you've prepared for your GED exam.

It might have been a while since you've taken some of these classes. Don't worry! Our teachers are always available to provide extra one-on-one support. Feel free to ask your teachers, or reach out to Karim at kcouser@yayb.org for help.

 If you notice any discrepancies in your attendance records or stipends, please contact our Director of Programs.

Pages 3 and 4 contain a set of checklists that detail the requirements for the other three program components: Earn (workforce readiness), Serve (AmeriCorps), and Succeed (career and financial development). These pages prompt students to keep track of their certifications, service hours, and other achievements. To acknowledge that everyone has different definitions of growth and achievement, there is sufficient free space for students to fill in their other accomplishments. Additionally, the milestones that trigger financial rewards have been highlighted in green.

EARN As a YAYB participant, you're required to complete a workforce training (or multiple trainings) of your choice. Plus, you can receive bonus stipends for completing certain certifications.

I learned the following certifications...
Check off the certifications you earned.

<p>Construction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> OSHA (+\$30) <input type="checkbox"/> Site Safety (+\$25) <input type="checkbox"/> NCCER 	<p>Building Operations & Maintenance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> BSP 	<p>Good Food Jobs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> NYC Food Protection (+\$50) <input type="checkbox"/> NRF Customer Service & Sales (+\$50)
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You can also participate in a **PAID** internship when you meet these criteria:

- Attend 75% or more of your class sessions
- Complete a resume
- Complete at least 30 hours of community service

Contact our Manager of Workforce Training, Brandon Bridgett, at bbridgett@yayb.org for more info.

SERVE You'll receive bonus stipends as you complete more service hours. Submit your AmeriCorps community service hours to Tiffany and track your progress below.

I reached these service hour milestones...
Check off the hours you earned.

<p>Nice neighbor</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> 25 hrs <input type="checkbox"/> 50 hrs (+\$25) <input type="checkbox"/> 75 hrs <input type="checkbox"/> 100 hrs (+\$25) 	<p>Helpful humanitarian</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> 125 hrs <input type="checkbox"/> 150 hrs (+\$30) <input type="checkbox"/> 175 hrs <input type="checkbox"/> 200 hrs (+\$35) <input type="checkbox"/> 225 hrs 	<p>Super samaritan</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> 250 hrs (+\$40) <input type="checkbox"/> 275 hrs <input type="checkbox"/> 300 hrs (\$1,500+ scholarship)
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! If you notice any discrepancies in your participation records, please contact Tiffany at tserri@yayb.org

Reflect on your service experience. What activities did you do? What did you learn? How did giving back make you feel?



SUCCEED You have the opportunity to develop important personal and professional skills throughout the year. Keep track of the milestones you hit and the skills you've developed here.

<p><i>Click to check off the milestones you reached.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Draft a resume <input type="checkbox"/> Create an individual development plan <input type="checkbox"/> Attend budgeting and financial management classes <input type="checkbox"/> Attend a Social Capital workshop <input type="checkbox"/> Attend a Leadership Development workshop <input type="checkbox"/> Develop your exit plan <input type="checkbox"/> Other: <input type="checkbox"/> Other: <input type="checkbox"/> Other: <input type="checkbox"/> Other: 	<p><i>Click to check off the skills you've developed.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Healthy sleep habits <input type="checkbox"/> Managing my spending <input type="checkbox"/> Other: <input type="checkbox"/> Other: <input type="checkbox"/> Other: <input type="checkbox"/> Other: <input type="checkbox"/> Other: <input type="checkbox"/> Other: <input type="checkbox"/> Other:
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! For more information on these opportunities, please contact Karim at krouser@yayb.org

Reflect & celebrate your progress! You keep putting in the hard work—take a moment to celebrate it! Use this space to note the other things you've done and ways you've grown during your time here at YAYB.

Finally, **page 5** provides helpful tips to help students stay engaged and succeed in the program, and **page 6** includes plenty of free space to allow students to jot down any notes that might help them stay on track, motivated, and engaged throughout the program.


HELPFUL TIPS


Set and stick to a schedule

Generally, you should plan to spend 8:30 am–3:30 pm Monday through Friday at YAYB.
 But, your individual schedule may be different. Fill in your schedule below:

Mornings (__ am—__ pm)	High school equivalency classes
Afternoons (__ —__ pm)	Workforce trainings, internships, and community service

Tell your support system

Your support system wants you to succeed, but they may not get to see you as much as they're used to. Let them know why you're committing yourself to this program for the next 9 months and how this will help you achieve your goals. **They can support you.**

Celebrate your progress!



Track and celebrate your progress on the previous pages!

Reach out for help

You're not in this alone. You are part of an incredible group of like-minded young people, dedicated to bettering themselves. If you ever struggle, reach out to a friend in your cohort. They may be able to help—or just lend a friendly ear. Plus, you have a team of staff here to support you. **We are with you every step of the way!**

Remind yourself of your "why"

YAYB is designed to help you grow, and sometimes growth can be difficult. But, **it's important to remember why you signed up for YAYB.** Whenever you face difficulties, take a moment to reflect on your motivation and refer to your response on the first page of this packet for encouragement.


HELPFUL TIPS


Other notes Use this space to jot down any other thoughts or notes that can help you stay on track, motivated, and working hard to achieve your goals!

The Journey Map is designed to be highly interactive and accessible on mobile devices, allowing students to revisit it regularly. In its printed form, the Map can also serve as a recruitment tool, ensuring that more YAYB applicants and participants fully understand the program's requirements.

Other Recommendations

In addition to the Journey Maps, we composed a document of specific, behaviorally informed recommendations for YAYB to improve their recruiting and outreach efforts and other essential student processes. This “Recommendations” document suggests ways to enhance student engagement by:

- ▶ **Regularly reminding students of the program’s benefits.** As students progress through the nine-month program, they may encounter obstacles that can affect their participation. To encourage consistent involvement, it can be helpful to remind them of what they stand to gain by remaining engaged. YAYB can try various strategies to keep these benefits salient, such as emphasizing the available financial rewards in individual advising meetings or regularly reviewing students’ individual goals with them.
- ▶ **Creating a sense of momentum.** Behavioral science research suggests that recognizing progress toward our goals strengthens our commitment to achieve them. When students see that their efforts (e.g., consistent participation in GED classes, training, and life skills offerings) are helping them make academic progress, gain job skills, expand their networks, or improve their finances, they are more likely to maintain that involvement. We recommend that YAYB instructors create additional opportunities to celebrate students’ success and showcase their growth.
- ▶ **Strengthen social accountability.** Learning new material can often be a lonely experience. However, as summarized earlier, members of YAYB place great value on the connections they form with others in their cohort. To capitalize on this sense of community and help students motivate one another, we suggested that YAYB explore additional ways to strengthen social accountability. Some ideas included setting up a “study buddy” program and offering more opportunities for students to work on assignments or activities in small groups.
- ▶ **Supporting students to stay engaged, even if they miss a class.** Participants in YAYB often have many responsibilities outside of the program and sometimes have difficulty managing their busy schedules. Providing flexibility and backstops can help mitigate obstacles that otherwise prevent youth from participating in the program. Accordingly, we encouraged YAYB to create hassle-free opportunities for students to catch up and progress, to help them stay committed even if they occasionally miss a session. For example, YAYB instructors could record and provide video summaries of lessons for students to review after missing a session.

Key takeaways and what’s next

Before finalizing our collaboration, we conducted user testing on the Journey Map with several current YAYB participants. The students found the map helpful, providing a clear and organized overview of all program components and milestones. They reported feeling more confident and better equipped to understand what they needed to do to complete the program. The students also appreciated the numerous checklists in the Journey Map, saying they would likely motivate them to complete as many tasks as possible. YAYB staff also expressed appreciation, noting that the insights and materials would be very helpful in their recruitment outreach and ongoing work with students.

At the time of this writing (late December 2023), the YAYB staff plan to introduce the Journey Map to students in the form of a New Year goal-setting exercise. They also plan to use the Map throughout the rest of the cohort. Next academic year, YAYB plans to share the newly created Journey Map with all incoming participants during their orientation. Staff also intend to implement several recommendations from the Recommendations document, such as revising the YAYB website to provide a more comprehensive and accurate description of the program's requirements. Looking forward, they plan to share all of these resources with the nine nonprofits participating in NYC's YouthBuild network, in the hopes that these resources can benefit an even broader community of young people.

It shouldn't come as a surprise that if you don't know the rules of a game, your chances of winning are slim. Similarly, completing a program involves understanding its requirements. Our understanding of the barriers YAYB students face in finishing their programs underscores the importance of clearly communicating expectations and rewards. By making the rules clear and by involving students in tracking their own progress, we can motivate them to become more committed and increase their chances of success in education and workforce development programs.

This work was generously supported by The Pinkerton Foundation.