

## **Bridging the Opportunity Gap: The Link Between Social Capital, Soft Skills and Networks**

**February 6, 2020 Webinar**

**Below are answers to questions that may not have been fully answered during the webinar. The full recording can be found [here](#).**

*Nancy Hoffman: What is the cost per student of your high school internship? Who pays the student salary?*

*Charlotte Lysohir from IBM ([www.ptech.org](http://www.ptech.org)): Are students paid for their internships?*

*Amy Grat/Dennis Johnson from EXP - how do you fund the wrap around services (transportation, work clothing, etc) that are often needed to ensure a student can successfully complete an internship?*

**Eshauna:** The cost varies by city, as our interns earn regional minimum wage with the opportunity for two merit-based wage increases over the course of the 9-month internship. In our standard model, employers pay both the cost of the student's salary as well as UA's programmatic costs associated with recruitment, training, case management, and mentoring. Students work part time during the school year (Monday – Thursday afternoons), and full-time during the summer (9-5pm Monday – Thursday), returning to UA for training workshops each Friday. The total cost is roughly \$15,000 per year per student, with approximately half of that comprising student salaries. In addition, UA works to secure funding for transportation (sometimes provided at no cost through school and city partnerships), work-appropriate clothing (sometimes provided through donations, and other needs to ensure students are job-ready.

*Abby Crisafulli from Denver Public Schools: How does UA engage industry partners in sharing in the development responsibilities of the youth you work with? Is there industry overlap inside of schools?*

**Eshauna:** In recent years, as the cost of college continues to balloon, we've increased our support for students who choose to pursue vocational training and employment opportunities immediately after high school. In Baltimore, for example, we've built partnerships with the construction, land surveying, and hospitality industries, working with organizations such as the Maryland Society of Surveyors to supplement our soft skills training with industry-specific hard skills, as well as to help students prepare for entry-level certifications. Additionally, we work with students enrolled in career and technical education pathways at our partner schools, matching them with employment opportunities in their field of interest – for example, Detroit students studying engineering and facilities management will be matched with similar jobs at a development partner like Bedrock Detroit. Again, our core soft skills curriculum serves as a supplement to the hard skills students learn at school, preparing them to succeed not just in any workplace, but in the industry pathway they are already pursuing.

*Paige: Thank you for this webinar! Eshauna, I am curious, how do you all pitch the idea to new organizations and research/vet the organization to best align with UA?*

**Eshauna:** We partner with a wide variety of businesses across industries to provide a diverse range of internship possibilities to our students. Our job partners are not only interested in uplifting their community in the long-term by investing in the next generation of homegrown talent, in the short-term, they are also getting talented entry-level employees who contribute real work impacting companies' bottom lines. The length of our program allows interns to go deeper than the typical summer or semester-long stint, gaining the inside knowledge and professional relationships needed to complete more meaningful projects. In addition, UA assumes most of the risk, handling payroll and liability, and ensuring that all job partners and interns have 24/7 support from dedicated program coordinators who act as case managers and problem solvers. We have high partner retention because the companies we partner with not only understand our mission, but also experience the value of a high school intern with a fresh perspective, raw talent, and a strong drive to succeed.

*Imane Zirari: In regards to internships at UA, how are you tracking student progress and ensure they are reflecting throughout the internship process? In addition, do students have to present or create a culminating project in the end?*

**Eshauna:** Urban Alliance has a multi-person evaluation team who track student progress and program outcomes throughout the year. Students are evaluated three times during the program to assess skill growth and personal development and their work plans and assigned tasks are adjusted accordingly to help them with skills they may need more time to practice.

The program also culminates in the annual Public Speaking Challenge in which, during a 5-10 minute presentation and Q&A session before a panel of community leaders, interns not only display many of the skills they've developed throughout the year, but also learn how to communicate the value of their internship experience in future job interviews.

*Laura Stateler, The Brookings Institution: Organizations like Urban Alliance have the capacity to build out QUALITY work-based learning experiences. Could you speak to efforts, that you know of, that states are doing to build out quality work-based learning experiences. How can internship experiences be scaled while keeping quality on the state level?*

**Eshauna:** As an intensive, deep-touch program, Urban Alliance is naturally more small-scale than, for instance, a city's summer youth employment program. However, it does not follow that it needs to be. This work relies heavily on local youth conveners – schools – and local employers working together – two entities who typically do not interact on a large scale. But today's students are tomorrow's job applicants and these groups can't afford to operate in silos. State and local governments can therefore play a large role in bridging the gap between the two and incentivizing larger-scale collaboration.

First, governors – and to some extent mayors – can play an important role in setting a workforce development agenda that prioritizes strategic partnerships between the public and private sector to prepare more young people to succeed in the workplace.

Second, governors, state education agencies, and LEAs should add employability as a measure of success for high schools, as well as offering work-based learning like internships as a way to earn school credit (which some of our school district partners do in Chicago and Detroit). As Eshauna noted, of the 1 in 9 disconnected youth nationwide, 75 percent have a high school diploma. The work to connect what is learned in the classroom to what is needed in the modern workplace requires incentives for both sectors to collaborate. Redefining outcomes and better integrating work-based learning experiences will require a shift in curriculum for high school students to meet these new mandates – and will require expanded dialogue between the two sectors.

Third, states can play an important convening role – bringing together state and local officials, employers, high school districts, philanthropy, and post-secondary institutions – to begin building the strategic partnerships that are required for this work. States play a critical role in both starting this conversation, and incentivizing further dialogue, because well-done cross-sector collaboration requires significant investment from schools and businesses – and public buy-in and investment from the top can overcome that initial barrier better than a single intermediary like Urban Alliance acting as the primary convener.

Places like Rhode Island and Detroit, MI are doing this well. Governor Raimondo of Rhode Island, for example, launched a state workforce development board and charged it with the mandate to get Rhode Islanders back to work. The board facilitates strategic partnerships between employers and post-secondary institutions to develop training programs that enable Rhode Islanders to develop the skills that regional and local employers actually need. The board also leverages data to build clearer continuums toward talent pipelines, bringing employers, training providers, and colleges to the table to invest in what works. At the local level in Detroit, Mayor Duggan has also prioritized workforce development, and specifically youth employment, as a critical tool for long-term competitiveness and economic sustainability. But what's been really special is that large employers like Quicken Loans and General Motors have joined him in this fight by stepping up to make major investments in youth workforce development programs that will produce their next generation talent. This work takes a village – and it requires all of us – every sector – to commit to getting it done – but it often starts with government leaders facilitating those initial conversations.

*Nancy Hoffman JFF: is Braven working with community colleges? I know that initially you did not.*

**Aimée:** We currently only work with 4-year universities: San José State University, Rutgers University-Newark, National Louis University, and Lehman College.

*Elizabeth Houlihan: Hello, this is Elizabeth from the University of Illinois at Chicago; Aimee can you please discuss the wage decrease for low-income students with a BA? How is it that*

*young people earn less after a particular salary range?*

**Aimée:** Low-income BA holders start their career earning 66% as much as their higher income peers and this gap worsens. By mid-career BA holding adults who initially came from a low-income household only earn half as much as their BA holding peers who initially came from higher income households. In a nutshell, for low-income BA holders, the returns on their degree diminish over time in comparison to their higher income peers. This is based on an analysis by the Brookings Institute and a 2018 study by Burning Glass, *The Permanent Detour: Underemployment's Long-Term Effects on the Careers of College grads*.

*Robyn Attebury Ellis from the Crimsonbridge Foundation - for Braven/Aime'e and UA/Eshauna - do you find that your practices on network-building and growing social capital for students align/complement/or replace what your partner colleges/universities are providing through their career services supports?*

**Aimée:** We collaborate to ensure that our work complements the services of our career service offices and programs. By focusing on many of the most vulnerable students within a campus, we are offering an extra level of support to the students who are most at risk of not obtaining a strong job. In addition, for students who are working, the course offers a mechanism to focus on career while obtaining credit for the degree.

**Eshauna:** Our program has always been about connecting the dots for students, ensuring that there is a smooth transition from high school to the world of work. Therefore, our programming is designed to complement what our school partners are teaching, and in some regions, is a way to earn high school course credit as well. We work closely with school partners to ensure that our program is a value-add for students.

*Bertina Ceccarelli: Aimee, this is Bertina Ceccarelli from NPower I believe you mentioned that 80% of your content is online. Eshauna discussed the strong value of building deep and trusting relationships for the student populations you are both serving (a quality we find essential in our own work at NPower). Beyond building relationships with internship partners, how are you encouraging those relationships outside the online environment with those who can be mentors/champions for your learners?*

**Aimée:** While 80% of the course is in the online portal, the secret sauce of our model is that Braven Fellows meet for two hours per week with their peer cohort (5-7 students) led by their Leadership Coach, who is a volunteer professional. This in-person time builds trust and application of the material that they are learning in the portal. Weekly in-person rituals like "Roses and Thorns" create vulnerability and connection in the small cohort between students and their Leadership Coach. Additionally, after the course Fellows that we identify as at-risk of not obtaining a strong job have the opportunity to participate in our Professional Mentor program which 1:1 matches them with a professional mentor in their chosen field.

*Mark, PwC Charitable Foundation : What do you want funders to know about the work of Bridging*

*the Opportunity Gap? What funding gaps exist in this work?*

**Aimée:** First, we would love for more funders to take an interest and understand the realities/challenges that exist for underrepresented college students to secure strong first jobs coming out with their bachelor's degree and begin to create portfolios that address the college-to-career opportunity gap. For many years, the public has believed that the college diploma was the ticket to the American Dream, and unfortunately for students from low-income backgrounds that's not a guarantee. In terms of funding gaps, there are many funding streams for workforce development (perhaps community college students, or opportunity youth) and for the K-12 pipeline to get students to college, but for students that attend a 4 year university (that's not the Ivy League), there are only a small number of funders currently focused on that space and no public grants that we have identified.

**Eshauna:** A lot of resources are directed toward the most vulnerable students – either pushing toward high school graduation as an end goal (which is most often not enough to prevent youth disconnection), or working to reconnect disconnected youth. Far fewer resources are directed toward the often-overlooked, middle-of-the-road students who are at greater risk of disconnection due to their race or socioeconomic status, but lack access to the kinds of opportunities needed to channel their innate talent into long-term economic success. Prevention is just as important a task as reconnection – and can be a more cost-effective approach over the long term given the staggering economic costs of youth disconnection.

*Joe Scantlebury : Thank you Isa, Karen, Eshauna, and Aimee for your thoughtful and informed presentations. Question: Can the approaches you shared be scaled through policy and public funding or are they dependent on local talent and private philanthropic support?*

**Aimée:** Braven, in full partnership with universities and employers, has the potential to create critical systemic innovation in how higher education prepares young people for success as well as in how employers source talent. To achieve that system change at scale, we need financial and human capital resources to expand within universities and university systems. On the financial front, we are seeing universities and employers play an increasing role in providing the revenue for our work, and while we see an ongoing and critical role for philanthropy, we also believe public funding. In terms of human capital, we need to be based in communities with strong labor markets, both for the volunteer professionals who fuel our model as well as for our alumni. One key advantage for us as we scale is that today's Braven student is tomorrow's volunteer professional. As we scale in students served, we essentially begin to grow our own pool of volunteers.

**Eshauna:** Government absolutely has a role to play in scaling this work. Please see our answer above about the critical role state and local governments can play in setting the workforce development agenda, incentivizing cross-sector collaboration, and making employability a measure of success for schools.

*Chris Boynton from Alameda County Office of Education in California : How are you evaluating the mastery of skills and competencies of soft skills? Is anyone doing that with content/sector skills?*

**Aimée:** For the competencies in our skills matrix, we use the course assignments to assess mastery. All assignments are designed to develop these skills we've found are critical to job attainment and success. By disaggregating the rubric score data, we can generate competency-specific scores for each Fellow. For the non-cognitive constructs we track (e.g. job search self efficacy, grit), we measure growth from pre to post program completion using academically validated survey scales.

**Eshauna:** At Urban Alliance, we developed our "employability" soft skills using best practices from industry leaders like CASEL and Child Trends to identify what training would best fit our students' specific developmental stage and employment context. Three times per year, students are formally evaluated on skill growth within each broad competency using a proprietary observational tool, and on-the-job mentors and program coordinators then collaborate with students to adjust growth plans and tasks as needed to provide more opportunities to practice skills that need more attention.

*From Matthew Cohen: The biggest barriers to success often have very little to do with academics or skills. Rather, they usually entail basic human needs, like food, housing and transportation. How are your partner intuitions responding here?*

**Eshauna:** At Urban Alliance, we work closely with our school partners to ensure that students' basic needs are met first and resolve issues such as transportation as they arise. For example, in some regions, school buses take students to and from their internships. We know that a large majority of our interns are contributing a portion of their paychecks toward household expenses, so our program coordinators – our case managers – closely monitor students, connecting them to additional trusted local institutions, peer organizations, and resources when needed. Participating in our program should only be an asset for students, so if at any time it becomes a barrier, program coordinators work with students to schedule a work break or amended work plan to ensure their personal well-being is always the top priority.

*Camille Idedevbo from Portland Public Schools. How do we integrate (and measure) soft skills at developmentally appropriate times along the P-12 continuum?*

**Karen:** You are right to ask the question of how we acknowledge overall development as we think about building social, emotional and cognitive skills and competencies. Too often we talk about skill development generically, or zoom in (in the case of soft skills) on the high school population. I highly recommend reviewing the executive summary and, if you have time, the full report, [Foundations for Young Adult Success](#), prepared by the Chicago Consortium for School Research. This is one of the few reports that not only defines skills, but explains when the ideal times are (from early childhood to young adulthood) for skill and competency development.

*From MDRC-NY: What role do you think career technology tools can play in supporting students in their decision-making?*

**Eshauna:** Some tools our students have found useful include LinkedIn to support network-building, as well as self-advocacy and post-high school planning – the latter especially by the ability to see others' career paths and choices. Additionally, LinkedIn and other organizations offer digital badging technology to help students quantify and display the soft skills they learn through our program, making something that is often nebulous more visceral for prospective employers. Further, the availability of online tools such as financial aid calculators and career aptitude tests help our students to make more informed post-high school plans.

*Daniel Tweed-Kent and Adriel Fuad (LinkedIn). How do you assess where are the skills gap for each participant?*

**Eshauna:** As mentioned before, we evaluate our students three times per year to assess skills growth. The initial, baseline assessment identifies growth areas for each student which on-the-job mentors and program coordinators then work to develop through specific skill-building tasks and projects at work.

*Josh from CommunityShare. Have you or your colleagues looked at how expanding educator's social capital can expand student social capital and opportunities.*

**Karen:** We haven't looked into this specifically at the Forum.

**Eshauna:** It is important to have cross-sector collaboration with schools and businesses working together to prepare the next generation for success. Businesses can make their social capital available to high school students, helping to solve the problem of 'you can't be what you can't see' (as Aimee discussed in her presentation) by increasing visibility into a variety of career options.

*Rukiya from Rush University Medical Center. Educational planning/course advising is an important component of guiding students on meaningful pathways. Are there any examples of quality collaboration with the college/career advising arms of universities/colleges?*

**Eshauna:** In Northern Virginia, we closely collaborate with Northern Virginia Community College, who not only hosts interns each year, but provides course credit to our students for the professional development they receive in our program, as well as provides information to students on their Pathway to the Baccalaureate program, a lower-cost option for students of lower socioeconomic status to obtain a bachelor's degree. In other regions, our program coordinators help to connect students to representatives from target schools, including financial aid and admissions officers, and set up informational sessions for students as well as college visits.

*This is Linda from Urban Initiatives. Thank you so much for this presentation! Could you all talk more about the developmental aspects of social capital? Earlier it was noted that soft skills+networks = social capital. Are there particular soft skills most crucial to building social capital, and at what stage of youth development do these typically become most important?*

**Eshauna:** Communication is vital for developing social capital. Our students learn not only basic oral and written communication, but also the importance of “code-switching” to communicate most effectively with various audiences, as well as self-advocacy. Students put all of these communication skills into play not only on the job, but at UA-hosted networking events where they have to interact with a wide variety of local professionals – often a new experience for them – and learn to market their skills through an “elevator pitch.” Without the ability to develop new connections through professional communication, students are not able to leverage those connections to build social capital. We tailor our skills training to the workplace context, which is developmentally appropriate for the age group we serve who are venturing out into the working world for the first time. However, communication is a vital tool for students from an early age, and can be integrated into classroom work with the focus on a non-workplace context.