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Offering a way back to hopes of college

A program targets some promising young people whose lives hit a bump on the path to higher education.

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BOSTON'S DOWNTOWN pedestrian mall teems with young adults, many on their way to or from a minimum-wage job. But sandwiched between the RadioShack and the Burger King there's a fifth-floor suite where better jobs finally seem within reach for a couple dozen 18- to 24-year olds.

They may not have dared to imagine that before they found Year Up, which offers college-level technology classes, professional and personal development, and paid apprenticeships. Participants must be high school graduates or have GEDs—and some even have a few college courses under their belts—but what largely defines them is a desire for higher education that has been thwarted by circumstances.

Some, like Ousdhane Chadic, are immigrants who need to earn money or boost their communication skills before plunging into college full time. Others, like Carlos Torres, long for college and higher salaries, but already have children to support. Still others have had to overcome homelessness or addiction.

What Year Up offers all these young people is a bridge to cross that "opportunity divide," says executive director Gerald Chertavian, an entrepreneur who used profits from the sale of an Internet firm to launch the nonprofit four years ago. Mr Chertavian had nurtured the concept since

the 1980s, when he was a Big Brother in a New York public housing complex. The people he met there were "wonderfully gifted, intelligent, and savvy—they just didn't have a path into the mainstream," he says. "It was unacceptable. America has nobody to waste."

Immigrants and racial minorities are the fastest growing groups in the United States, and "they're getting the least amount

of education at a time when our knowledge-based economy is increasingly demanding higher-level skills," he says. "So you have a divide between people who can get into the game and those who can't."

Employers, educators, and government officials are all looking for solutions to that disconnect. "We're struggling as a society to reinvent vocational education," says Howard Husock, director of the Initiative for Social Entrepreneurship at the Manhattan Institute. "It used to be there were trades, there were factories, people had a sense of how to do this. And now we've got such a changing workforce all the time."

Year Up, which recently received FastCompany's Social Capitalist Award for its innovation and social impact, is "reinventing that loop" between education and jobs, Mr. Husock says, but this time the jobs are in giant financial and healthcare firms, where the demand is as much for people skills as for technical ones.

Gaining polish

Year Up gives students a stipend while they take technical classes and gain some professional polish.

Then it sends them into a six-month paid apprenticeship, where they

test their skills but still can call on the support of Year Up staff and mentors. Every day there's an emphasis on what Chertavian calls the ABC component—Attitude, Behavior, Communication. And that impresses employers. One apprentice recently helped a senior hospital executive with a computer problem. The executive didn't know the young man wasn't part of the regular staff when he sent a complimentary



A HELPING HAND: Year Up student Carlos Torres (top) talks with his mentor, Peter Handrinos, a senior partner at a Boston law firm, while other Year Up students take a tour of Putnam Investments (above). The program offers high school grads a chance to learn technical and social skills to prepare them for college and professional opportunities.

continued

e-mail to Mary Finlay, deputy chief information officer for Partners HealthCare System.

“He said, ‘You’ve got a wonderful staff and he was so helpful and didn’t make me feel like an idiot,’” Ms. Finlay says. That’s hard to teach entry-level employees, and “that’s why we go back to [Year Up],” she says.

Year Up represents a broader shift toward “looking at a career ladder, helping someone get into a position that has a future, so that they have family-sustaining wages,” says Pat Lees, a workforce-learning consultant at the Chicago-based Council for Adult & Experiential Learning (CAEL). Her group has found great success at test sites for Lifelong Learning Accounts, where employers match employee contributions to a fund that can be used for continuing education.

The jobs Year Up alumni land pay an average of \$14 an hour, and Chertavian says he’ll tweak the curriculum as the market for technology jobs changes. But he’s equally devoted to nurturing students’ love of learning. Through a partnership with Cambridge College, which caters to people who juggle school, work, and family, Year Up students earn up to 18 credits. “Now, forevermore on their resume they can say, ‘College Degree expected,’” Chertavian says. “With just that alone, on average they’re expected to earn 25 percent more than their counterparts who don’t have some college experience.”

Year Up started with 22 students four years ago and now serves about 200. Expanding to cities such as Providence, R.I., it expects to help more than 700 students in a few years.

Numbers are one way Chertavian can claim success: 86 percent of students complete the program and 87 percent of graduates are placed in professional jobs; 9 out of 10 employers say the apprentices’ professional and technical skills meet or exceed expectations; 65 percent of alumni have been accepted into colleges.

The other evidence is in the students’ firm handshakes and confident voices.

“I’m better at public speaking,” says Ms. Chadic, who arrived from Haiti at 16 and then graduated from a Boston public high school. “Some of the things that we’ve learned here, we wouldn’t have learned even if we were at college,” she says.

Mr. Torres applied to Year Up when he realized that continuing to work at minimum wage wouldn’t cut it. At 23, he’s the father of two children. He’s been with their mother for six years and was inspired to see her go through Year Up and then simultaneously work and go to college.

“I definitely want to be a part of

that success,” he says. He hopes eventually to take the police exam, but he already credits Year Up for how he’s changed—“coming dressed professionally every day, [and] the way I carry myself” he says, pointing to his tie. “[I’m] going out there and people are acknowledging me as a professional.”

Communications Skills

During the afternoon class, students sit in front of sleek computers—the tools of their new trade. But at the moment, their attention is on a classmate practicing her end-of-the-semester speech for the communications unit.

Before Tayssi Princivil gets through the first sentence of her speech about a spate of abductions, the teacher reminds her to take her hands out of her pockets. Unflustered, she starts again, looking directly at her audience. A few times she apologetically looks over her notes, but when she’s done, the feedback is reassuring.

“You really know your material,” one classmate says. “Don’t doubt yourself. You’ve got that strong personality that we all know and love.”

Schooled for the past few months in giving



constructive criticism, another student suggests she trim her examples so they have more power. Teacher Melanee Grondahl gives specific praise and a few pointers, urging her to practice pronouncing “abductions” clearly.

This group will be matched with employers such as Fidelity and Staples for apprenticeships starting in January. They’ll work full time, except for Wednesday afternoons, when students come back to Year Up to get feedback and polish their skills. Kimberly Zouzoua, who advises students and coordinates with employers, recalls one

who complained about a tedious task: tagging computer hardware.

“I said, ‘You know, you have to crawl before you walk. They want to see if you’re diligent...[and] if you do it with a smile.’” He took that advice and soon was given more responsibility—and a job offer.

Employers pay about \$700 per week for each apprentice. Year Up pays students a stipend throughout the year, with deductions or bonuses tied to behavior and performance.

“Everybody that’s come to the table [as an apprentice] has actually come as advertised,” says Peter Quinn, chief information officer for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. “There’s a degree of quiet confidence...a great work ethic, and just a desire to succeed. Very often that gets



PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT: Year Up students Karl Jenness (facing) and Jorge Rosario (in background) engage in mock interviews at the Year Up offices in Boston. Below, students listen to a job-panel discussion with Putnam Investments employees.



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Gerald Chertavian, founder of the non-profit organization Year Up

[hidden] and Year Up has a great way of bringing it out.”

For adult learners, the barrier may be money or motivation, but a little help designed to fit their needs can go a long way, says Ms. Lees of CAEL. “There’s a whole range of personal stories that come along with [determining] when is the time to learn. For some people it’s, ‘I need to show my kids that school is important.’ Some are just tired of being in a minimum-wage job and say, ‘Nobody’s going to do this for

me’...They really have to be ready to learn, and that’s different for each of us.”