

The Boston Globe

CLIMBING UP TO CAREERS

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GETTING TO WORK

ONE IN AN OCCASIONAL SERIES

EYE CONTACT, handshakes, and warm greetings are part of the social fabric at Year Up, a yearlong work force development program for low-income 18- to 24-year-olds.

Started in 2000, Year Up is a Cinderella program that turns urban youths who want to succeed into polished job candidates. Students spend six months in personal, professional, and technical skills classes. They are mostly racial minorities, and more than 60 percent are men - an impressive fact, since many work force programs attract more women. During the second six months, students take internships in a range of work sites, including Boston College, Boston Medical Center, and Fidelity Investments. Dual enrollment at Cambridge College means students leave Year Up with college credit. More than 85 percent of graduates have gotten jobs.

Year Up's staff includes two social workers who help students cope with incarcerated parents, homelessness, and other concerns. Some 15 percent of the program's male students have been involved with the Department of Youth Services.

Year Up's culture is challenging. Students who mean "ask" but say "ax" or use casual profanity are corrected and may end up in a discussion with teachers about how to sound professional. Being late without a reasonable excuse means losing a small part of the stipend Year Up pays to students in classes and internships. Low-income students have to earn while they learn, Year Up's founder, Gerald Chertavian, says; otherwise they can't afford an education. It's a striking perspective from a former businessman who made money when the software company he worked at was sold.

Year Up's explicit message is that everyone has the right to have a good career: Jobs in financial services, biotech, and education are not merely industries for luckier, more privileged people. The unstated message embedded in the energetic environment is that it's cool to be a success. Knowing the latest movies and music is fine. But at Year Up, it's also hip to work hard, be a team player, be able to ask for help, and have a sense of oneself and one's goals.

Year Up has two sites, one in Boston and the other in Cambridge. A site will open soon in Providence - classes will begin in January. And there are plans to open in New York City. Ten years from now, Chertavian says, thousands of students will have been trained and placed, creating an alumni network that will pull other young people into local and regional labor markets.

According to US Census figures, half of the country's college students are 25 or older. The public challenge is how to replicate Year Up and other programs that give young adults the conviction and the skills to make the most of the years between high school and college.

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