

MAINE CAREER EXPLORATION

Interim Evaluation Report



DATA INNOVATION PROJECT
Catherine Cutler Institute
University of Southern Maine
Prepared for the State of Maine



DATA INNOVATION PROJECT

This independent, third-party research report was commissioned by the Governor's Office of Policy Innovation and the Future and the Maine Department of Economic and Community Development. This report was developed by the Data Innovation Project, which is part of the Catherine Cutler Institute for Health and Social Policy at the University of Southern Maine. This retrospective evaluation study of the Maine Career Exploration (MCE) initiative was conducted in accordance with the Office of Research Integrity & Outreach's Policy on Financial Conflict of Interest (FCOI) Objectivity in Research at the University of Southern Maine (Procedure #: FCOI-01 & HRPP-045). The MCE initiative is an investment of the Maine Jobs & Recovery Plan, managed by the Maine Department of Economic and Community Development, and implemented by the Maine Children's Cabinet, the Maine Department of Education, and Jobs for Maine Graduates.

All images used in the report come from the Maine Department of Education.

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Research Disclosure Statement

The Data Innovation Project recognizes that the study of the social realm can never be truly neutral and that as applied researchers our specific positionalities in social strata may influence our experience and interpretation of reality as well as our approach to understanding reality. For this reason, we believe it is our responsibility to be transparent about who we are as meaning makers and producers of knowledge. We are a team of educated middle-class, White professionals. Nevertheless, we strive to mitigate our biases through continuing education, reflection and self-work, and our study approach and design. If you believe we have overlooked a critical perspective or interpretation in our work, however, we invite you to let us know so that we may address it.

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The Maine Career Exploration (MCE) program is a two-year pilot initiative that aims to connect young people to Maine's economy through age-appropriate career exploration opportunities and pathways by providing youth with direct interaction with businesses, non-profits, and the public sector to understand career opportunities that align with their interests. Launched in the summer of 2022 with \$25 million of funding from Governor Mills' Jobs & Recovery Plan, the primary goals of the MCE pilot initiative are to:

- ▶ Connect 6,000 young people aged 16-24 in Maine to future career opportunities by funding paid work experiences with employers across the state.
- ▶ Expand existing and build new Career Exploration programming in high schools and communities.
- ▶ Establish infrastructure to support this programming beyond the federal funding for the initiative.

The Maine Department of Economic and Community Development (MDECD) provides program management and oversight of the overall statewide initiative while the \$25 million investment was allocated to three areas of programming:

1. Maine Children's Cabinet Career Exploration Pilot Project
2. Maine Department of Education Extended Learning Opportunity Expansion Program
3. Jobs for Maine Graduates Career Exploration Expansion

While each of the programs implementing the MCE initiative have targeted youth populations and distinctive program designs that are further detailed in the report, they all share the outlook that exposing young people to new career readiness experiences and pathways leads to improved career and educational skills and aspirations in the short term and improved lifetime earnings and job quality, stronger ties to Maine's employers, and a healthier labor market in the long term.

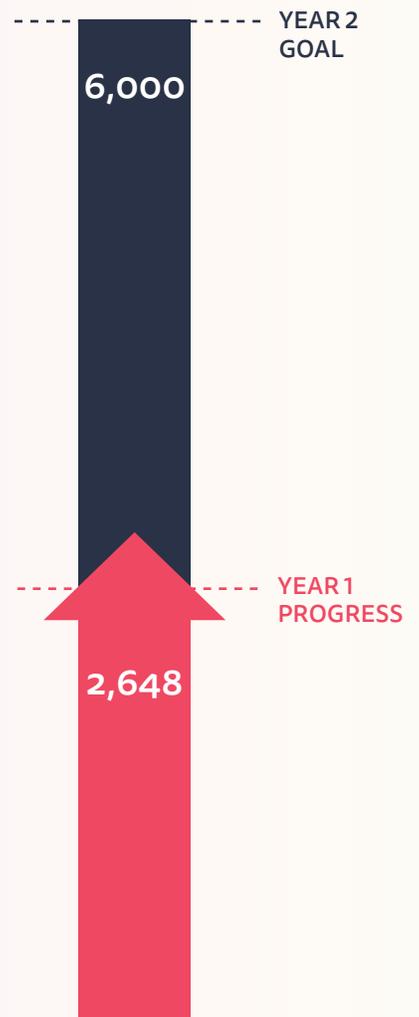
Year 1 Implementation Highlights by the Numbers

The first year of MCE implementation expanded access to career exploration opportunities throughout Maine’s 16 counties, made significant progress towards the two-year goal of reaching 6,000 young people (Figure 1),ⁱ and developed infrastructure to increase capacity, integration, and sustainability across the burgeoning network. As a result of MCE funding, in year-one:

- ▶ **The Maine Children’s Cabinet pilot project** enabled five community-based organizations (CBOs) to develop brand new or expanded programming to increase access to career exploration for disadvantaged youth through a model which includes job-readiness, paid work experience, and wraparound support services. In year-one, CBOs engaged dozens of Maine employers, 212 youth completed job-readiness training, and 70 youth completed paid work experiences.
- ▶ **The Maine Department of Education ELO Expansion project** established 19 brand new ELO programs and expanded seven existing programs, making ELOs available to more Maine students and reaching many rural communities that did not previously have access. DOE grantees reported that 784 students completed paid ELO experiences, students earned 974.25 credits, and programs established 1,115 new community and business partnerships.
- ▶ **Jobs for Maine Graduates (JMG)** reported that 1,794 Maine students completed the MCE Badge in year 1, which includes a 40-hour work experience and completion stipend. To support ELO expansion, JMG developed a new Learning Management System (LMS) virtual platform, held ELO regional meetings and an annual conference for training and networking, and engaged in 1,421 coaching interactions with ELO coordinators and/or school administrators from 289 schools.
- ▶ **The Maine Department of Economic and Community Development** developed employer outreach and onboarding systems and established a partnership with Manpower Maine to streamline student onboarding and support the administration of pay for MCE work experiences.

FIGURE 1.

Completed Paid Meaningful Work Experiences, MCE Year 1



ⁱ Total completed paid work experiences represent the total number of paid ELO experiences, paid CBO work experiences, and JMG Maine Career Exploration Badges completed in Year 1, ending in the fall of 2023. This count does not include students who completed ELO experiences for credit only and CBO-engaged youth who completed job-readiness training (often paid), but who had not yet completed the paid work experience component of the program.



Purpose of this Report

The State of Maine engaged the Data Innovation Project (DIP) at the University of Southern Maine's Catherine Cutler Institute to employ a mixed method research approach to document the potential impact and effectiveness of the MCE program's first year. The evaluation focused on the impact of the paid meaningful career experience and supports offered to the young people and employers who participated, in addition to the impact of the capacity building supports for the entities administering the program.

The formative and summative data gathering for this

evaluation centered on the Maine Department of Education-funded Extended Learning Opportunity (ELO) Expansion Program and the Children's Cabinet's Career Exploration Pilot Project (CBO). While Jobs for Maine Graduates (JMG) programming and their important role is discussed in the report, JMG conducted a separate evaluation of its MCE-funded efforts. Therefore, the emerging findings detailed in this report are based on CBO and ELO-engaged youth, program coordinators, and employers that responded to evaluation activities and the findings should be viewed within this context.

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I've figured out what college I want to go to, and I've learned about the FAFSA that can help me go to the college I want. I've learned what to do if I'm unable to find a job, I know where to go. I've learned about trades, and many other career paths. I now have a lot more social skills and know how to speak to people I've never spoken to before. I understand questions I'm supposed to ask in an interview and what is expected of me. I've learned SO much.

ELO-ENGAGED YOUTH

Emerging Findings

Positive Outcomes for Participants

In the first year of programming, the Maine Career Exploration program yielded positive outcomes for participants in the short-term which have the potential to contribute to Maine's workforce pipeline in the longer-term. Specifically, the findings indicate that program engagement supported the following outcomes for youth participants:

- ▶ **Improved academic experience**
- ▶ **Growth in targeted 21st Century job-readiness skills and abilities**
- ▶ **Improved social-emotional skills like confidence, motivation, and communication**
- ▶ **Increased understanding and awareness of career post-secondary opportunities**
- ▶ **Greater clarity around career and future plans**
- ▶ **Building hope for participants, families, & communities**
- ▶ **Increased employment, including job offers from MCE-engaged employers**

Additionally, the evidence suggests that the MCE program **contributes to a workforce development pipeline** by connecting youth and Maine employers in ways that result in jobs in the short-term for many participants and will pay off for both parties in the longer term. Employers not only appreciate the opportunity to build relationships with the next generation of workers but see these experiences as bringing about the moderate or major **benefit of attracting talent to Maine's industries and fields.**

Program Implementation Successes

Program successes were directly related to how the MCE program was designed and implemented by program staff. In fact, the CBO and ELO program coordinator role emerged as a critical factor influencing positive experiences and successful outcomes for participating youth and employers. Looking at implementation successes by program participant type, the following findings were observed:

Youth Participants

- ▶ **Intensive and consistent support from adults** helped youth stay engaged and be successful in the program.
- ▶ **ELO group experiences and CBO cohort approaches** made career

exploration accessible and relevant to more young people, specifically those that needed more support or who were less prepared for a work experience.

- ▶ Youth were highly motivated to engage in the program because of its focus on **hands-on, guided learning & meaningful work experiences**.
- ▶ **Pay functioned as an incentive and an equalizer** by promoting participation and expanding career exploration access to youth from disengaged or economically disadvantaged backgrounds.
- ▶ **Transportation support** was critical for expanding program access to young people, especially from low-income backgrounds and rural communities.

Coordinators

- ▶ CBO coordinators whose organizations were, for the most part, embarking on career exploration programming for the first time, found essential support from **quarterly grantee cohort meetings** with the Maine Children’s Cabinet (MCC); **direct assistance** from the MCC director and the MCE Statewide Program Coordinator at DECD; and through the **grant program’s implementation flexibility** which enabled coordinators to tailor the program to their youth populations.
- ▶ ELO coordinators overwhelmingly described their key supports as **members of their immediate school community** (including school administrators, teachers, and guidance counselors); **Jobs for Maine Graduates, the Maine DOE, and other community partnerships and regional collaborations** across economic, workforce, and youth development efforts; as well as **creativity in program expansion approaches**.

Employers

- ▶ Almost all employers **identified initial and ongoing support from a program coordinator** as instrumental to their successful recruitment and engagement in the MCE program.
- ▶ **Offering tiered levels of engagement** enabled program coordinators to successfully recruit employers by **meeting them where they were at**.
- ▶ **Youth compensation supplied by the MCE program** acted as a key incentive and enabled employers to participate in the program.

“

It’s been a great way for students to gain real-life, real-world, work experience and also learn about possible opportunities in their field of interest.

MCE EMPLOYER SURVEY COMMENT

Program Implementation Challenges

Program implementation challenges were both internal and external in nature, relating to broader issues and dynamics facing the state's economy and its workforce. These challenges offer insight that the MCE program can leverage to improve, expand, and sustain the encouraging outcomes emerging from the program so far. Importantly, challenges related to pay, transportation, and supports highlight opportunities to improve equity in access. Key implementation challenges included:

- ▶ **Limited or inaccessible transportation**, like school bus driver shortages and inadequate public and individual transportation, which negatively impacted participant access to the program or limited the quality of ELO experiences.
- ▶ **Challenging employer recruitment for student placements** since employers were short-staffed, stressed, or had limited resources due a tight labor market.
- ▶ **Difficulty or hesitation administering compensation** to participants for work experiences.
- ▶ Instances where **compensation had negative impacts on public benefits** for youth participants and their families.
- ▶ Some youth had trouble **balancing the timing and scheduling** of work, school, and other personal commitments with ELO work experiences.
- ▶ Some students **needed more job-readiness and social-emotional support** to be adequately prepared for an ELO work experience.
- ▶ Teachers and school administrators **lacked knowledge or understanding of ELOs** and their relationship to academics which hindered implementation and access to programming.
- ▶ A **lack of coordination** between overlapping ELO outreach efforts and a **need for role clarity** impeded relationship building efforts for some ELO coordinators.
- ▶ Concerns about the **sustainability of expanded ELO offerings** hampered implementation for some ELO programs.

Considerations for Future Programming

Against the backdrop of the successes and challenges experienced in the first year, the following considerations are offered to MCE as it navigates the second year of program implementation. These considerations are organized into two broad categories: program elements to expand and sustain career exploration and program elements to promote equity.

Expanding and Sustaining Career Exploration in Maine

- ▶ The field needs additional communication tools for effective ELO promotion.
- ▶ JMG provides vital support for ELO coordinators and program expansion.
- ▶ Increased coordination and role clarity between ELOs and JMG could mitigate overlapping efforts.
- ▶ Programs need increased support for administering pay, particularly for CBOs.
- ▶ Flexible and responsive programming for vulnerable youth yields positive impacts
- ▶ Relationship-building, flexibility, and support are key to sustaining and expanding employer engagement.
- ▶ ELO sustainability would benefit from tools that support local conversations about program needs.

Equitable Access to Career Exploration

- ▶ Pay is an incentive and an equalizer to program participation, especially for disadvantaged and disconnected young people.
- ▶ Pay can be a risk or barrier for some low-income youth.
- ▶ Transportation challenges exacerbate uneven program access.
- ▶ ELO programs encounter barriers that particularly impact struggling or disengaged students.

Introduction

Initiatives like the Maine Career Exploration (MCE) program are built on the understanding that exposing young people to new experiences and pathways, and paid work experience, leads to improved lifetime earnings, stronger ties to Maine’s employers, and, ultimately, an improved labor market. Career readiness programs also aim to improve young people’s capacity for goal setting, social and emotional intelligence, sense of self, and employable skills.¹ Evidence suggests that activities like those in the MCE program improve youth career and educational skills and aspirations in the short term and have positive implications for the long-term outcomes of future earnings, career, and job quality.^{2,3,4}

Simultaneously, emerging practices in education policy expand the scope of what it means for young adults to be prepared for life after high school, moving beyond a singular focus on college to include career and life readiness. The Maine Department of Education recently updated the Maine Learning Results Life and Career Ready Standards (2020) to align with these practices and support the development of important career readiness elements for K-12 students in Maine. For high school students, these standards now include:

- ▶ Self-Knowledge and Life Skills (social and emotional development);
- ▶ Aspirations (exploration and understanding of options after high school); and
- ▶ Building Pathways for the Future (planning for and implementing career and life goals).⁵

These standards support youth to make a personalized plan for their career and life goals and adapt to change and challenges to stay on track. The Maine’s Career Exploration initiative seeks to support school districts in providing students opportunities to gain and practice these critical skills.



Purpose of this Report

This evaluation report begins by detailing the origination of funding and purpose of the MCE program. It next provides a brief description of program models and grantees before detailing the career exploration definitions and year one program outputs that drive this initiative and contextualizes this report. After describing the methodology used to generate data for this program evaluation, the report explores and synthesizes the emerging findings. The report finishes with a high-level discussion of emerging implications for the field, policy makers, and state and local school administrators.



Origination of Funding and Purpose of MCE Program

The Maine Career Exploration (MCE) program, launched in summer of 2022, has its roots in Maine's 10-year economic development strategy (2019). The plan recommended the establishment of MCE to support the goal of adding 75,000 workers to Maine's workforce by 2030 by connecting young people to Maine's economy through age-appropriate career exploration opportunities and pathways that align with individual areas of interests. A two-year pilot of the recommended strategy was ultimately launched in 2022 with \$25 million of funding from Governor Mills' Jobs & Recovery Plan (2021), which invested nearly \$1 billion in federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds to help Maine people, businesses, and communities recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The negative economic impacts of the pandemic for young people added a new sense of urgency to the career exploration strategy conceived pre-Covid. Between the spring of 2019 and the spring of 2020, the overall national unemployment rate for young workers ages 16-24 increased sharply from 8.4% to 24.4% while it rose from 2.8% to 11.3% for workers 25 and older.⁶ Young workers experienced disproportionate job loss, had limited opportunities for gaining critical early work experience, and were often times ineligible for unemployment insurance supports despite facing

limited prospects if they were seeking employment for the first time. The pilot MCE program seeks to fill this gap in work experience learning by targeting this highly impacted age group.

The primary goals of the Maine Career Exploration pilot initiative are to:

- Connect 6,000 young people aged 16-24 in Maine to future career opportunities by funding paid work experiences with employers across the state.
- Expand existing and build new Career Exploration programming in high schools and communities.
- Establish infrastructure to support this programming beyond the federal funding for the initiative.

This \$25 million Maine Jobs & Recovery Plan investment was allocated across three funding streams representing the primary areas of MCE programming, with program management, administration, and oversight of the overall statewide initiative provided by the Maine Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD).

Areas of MCE Programming

Maine Children's Cabinet Career Exploration Pilot Project

The Maine Children's Cabinet Pilot Project provides funding through grants administered by the Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD) to support disconnected and under-represented youth in career exploration and meaningful paid work programming. Applicants were required to be a community-based organization, education provider, or workforce development entity currently providing services to Maine youth.

TARGET POPULATION: Maine youth 16-24 years old including youth with disabilities, those connected to the juvenile justice system, those experiencing homelessness, those transitioning in or out of the foster care system, those with low-income, and youth of color and/or from indigenous communities.

FIVE COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS (CBOS) RECEIVED GRANTS:

- ▶ **Aroostook County Action Program** is developing a young workers academy.
- ▶ **Eastern Maine Development Council (EMDC)** is funding the Young Mainers Workforce Academy.
- ▶ **LearningWorks** extended its service programming for its YouthBuild program to rural Cumberland County and York County. This is a 21-month program which includes a 3-month internship.
- ▶ **Midcoast Youth Center (MYC)** developed and is implementing the Career Opportunities & Advancing Skills Together (COAST) program, which offers work-readiness training and paid work experience.
- ▶ **Tree Street Youth** developed and is implementing the Peer Inspired Navigation of Employment (PINE) Initiative. This program employs a mentor model to deliver on the job coaching and training, and financial literacy.

CBO GRANTEES WERE REQUIRED TO OFFER:

- ▶ Work-readiness training to build skills that prepare youth to participate in paid work experiences. This could include, resume writing, interviewing skills, financial literacy, etc.
- ▶ Paid work experience that included a wage or stipend.
- ▶ Connections to support services.

Maine Department of Education (Maine DOE) Extended Learning Opportunity Expansion Program

The DOE grant program expanded the Extended Learning Opportunity (ELO) programs in Maine for students 16-22 years old and funded 26 sites. Most sites are publicly funded School Administrative Units (SAUs), with some Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) and Career and Technical Education Centers (CTEs), and one public university, acting as ELO intermediaries. The Maine DOE Office of Workforce Development & Innovative Pathways provides comprehensive coordination of expanded learning opportunities for students to support Maine's workforce goals.

TARGET POPULATION: Maine students, 16-22 years old

ELO EXPANSION GRANTEES OFFERED:

- ▶ Credit-bearing ELO experiences for elective or core credit, and/or a paid work experience which included a wage or stipend.
- ▶ Informal extended learning opportunities, such as job shadows, field trips, career fairs, visiting speakers, etc.
- ▶ Summer programming (not all sites).

Jobs for Maine Graduates (JMG) Career Exploration Expansion

Established by the State Legislature in 1993, JMG is the largest statewide education nonprofit in Maine. The MCE program provided one-time funding to JMG:

- ▶ To **expand JMG's career exploration work** at 90 Maine high schools to support more students participating in ELOs, meaningful paid work experience, and attaining credentials/badges to prepare them for future employment and/or post-secondary degree programs.
- ▶ For JMG to **support the DOE-funded ELO Expansion** by:
 - Providing coaching and training for ELO coordinators, Maine School Administration members, and JMG Specialists.
 - Developing a new Learning Management System (LMS) virtual platform to support ELOs, including student courses that align with Maine Learning Standards and professional development resources for school personnel and business partners.

TARGET POPULATION: Rising juniors and seniors, ELO coordinators, and Maine School Administration members.

TABLE 1.
MCE New and Expanded ELO and CBO Sites

SITE	CITY/TOWN	TYPE	STATUS
Baileyville Public Schools (Woodland Jr-Sr High School)	Baileyville	ELO	▲ New
RSU 1 (Morse High School)	Bath	ELO	▲ New
Waldo County Technical Center	Belfast	ELO	▲ New
RSU 71 (Belfast Area High School)	Belfast	ELO	▲ New
RSU 44/MSAD 44 (Telstar High School)	Bethel	ELO	▲ New
Biddeford Public Schools (Alternative Pathways Center)	Biddeford	ELO	● Expanded
Brewer Public Schools (Brewer High School)	Brewer	ELO	▲ New
Brunswick Public Schools (Brunswick High School)	Brunswick	ELO	● Expanded
RSU 84/MSAD 14 (East Grand School)	Danforth	ELO	▲ New
Deer Isle-Stonington CSD (Deer Isle Stonington High School)	Deer Isle	ELO	▲ New
RSU 35/MSAD 35 (Marshwood High School)	Eliot	ELO	▲ New
Healthy Acadia	Ellsworth	ELO	▲ New
Boys & Girls Club of Kennebec Valley	Gardiner	ELO	▲ New
Gorham Public Schools (Gorham High School)	Gorham	ELO	● Expanded
RSU 55/MSAD 55 (Sacopee Valley High School)	Hiram	ELO	▲ New
RSU 59/MSAD 59 (Madison Area Memorial High School)	Madison	ELO	▲ New
RSU 19 (Nokomis Regional High School)	Newport	ELO	● Expanded
RSU 60/MSAD 60 (Noble High School)	North Berwick	ELO	● Expanded
University of Maine Presque Isle	Presque Isle	ELO	▲ New
RSU 13 (Oceanside High School)	Rockland	ELO	▲ New
Oxford Hills Community Education Exchange	South Paris	ELO	▲ New
South Portland Public Schools (South Portland High School)	South Portland	ELO	● Expanded
RSU 75/MSAD 75 (Mt. Ararat High School)	Topsham	ELO	▲ New
RSU 14 (Windham High School)	Windham	ELO	▲ New
Yarmouth Schools (Yarmouth High School)	Yarmouth	ELO	● Expanded
Aroostook County Action Program	Presque Isle	CBO + ELO	▲ New
Eastern Maine Development Corporation	Bangor	CBO	▲ New
Midcoast Youth Center	Bath	CBO	▲ New
Tree Street Youth Center	Lewiston	CBO	▲ New
LearningWorks YouthBuild	Portland	CBO	● Expanded

FIGURE 2.
MCE New and Expanded ELO and CBO Sites Map

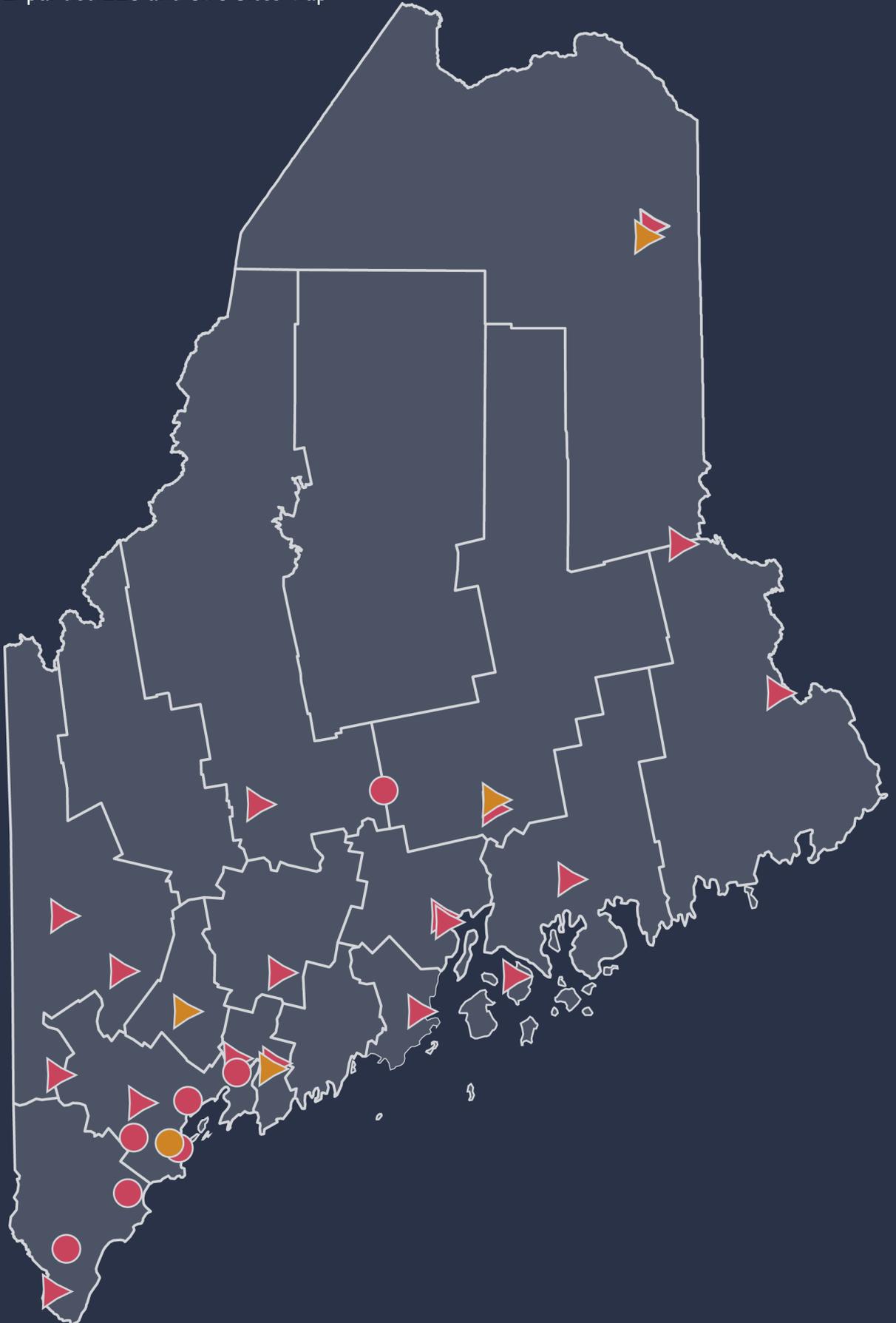


TABLE 2.

Continuum of Maine Career Exploration Program Activities

MCE Program Activity	Work-based Learning Activity <i>(as defined by literature nationally)</i>	Examples
JOB READINESS	<p>PREPARING FOR WORK Activities and training that prepare youth to participate successfully in the paid work experience component of the MCE program and to participate in work in the future.</p>	Financial literacy, interviewing skills, resume writing, developing good work habits, attaining documentation necessary for work, job application processes, etc.
CAREER AWARENESS	<p>LEARNING ABOUT CAREER OPPORTUNITIES Youth build awareness about career and postsecondary options.</p>	Career fairs, field trips, speakers, and college visits.
MEANINGFUL WORK EXPERIENCE	<p>CAREER EXPLORATION Youth explore career and postsecondary options to make informed decisions about their future.</p>	Job shadow and mentors
	<p>CAREER PREPARATION Youth apply learning through hands-on experience.</p>	Internships, pre-apprenticeships, service learning, and project-based learning.
	<p>CAREER TRAINING Learners train for employment and/or postsecondary education by engaging in work experiences</p>	Internships and apprenticeships.

Career Exploration Defined

The Maine Career Exploration program has a long-term goal of addressing Maine’s workforce shortage by engaging young people in paid meaningful work experiences that grow local talent and connect future workers to Maine employers. The State of Maine defines career exploration as an experience which connects students with workforce opportunities in their communities by providing youth with direct interaction with businesses, non-profits, and/or the government sector to understand career opportunities that align with their interests.⁷ This includes extended learning opportunities (ELOs), which means the acquisition of knowledge and skills, using defined objectives, through hands-on, credit-bearing experiences outside of the traditional classroom including community-based career exploration.

Career exploration as implemented by Maine’s pilot

initiative is inclusive of a range of activities along a continuum of work-based learning (WBL) activities defined by literature nationally. This is illustrated in the graphic above (Table 2), which is adapted from two reports⁸ that make policy recommendations for states to implement high-quality WBL experiences. For example, MCE’s school-based ELO programs engage students in career awareness activities like field trips, career fairs, and visiting speakers. Some ELO programs incorporate job readiness training, while CBO programs focus specifically on job-readiness and support services to meet the needs of disadvantaged youth. The meaningful work experience component of Maine’s career exploration program includes job shadow, internships, mentorship, apprenticeship, community service, independent study, and work-based learning, which represent varied levels of intensity along the work experience portion of the continuum.

What is a meaningful work experience?

MCE defines meaningful work experience as a work-based experiential learning opportunity for youth to address a defined problem or participate in a project that is of value to an employer and provides an opportunity to reflect on the challenges and solutions. Meaningful paid work experience gives youth the opportunity to gain valuable applied experience in a business, non-profit or the government sector and make connections in professional fields they are considering for career paths. It includes an opportunity to learn foundational skills as well as 21st century skills, such as creativity, communication, collaboration, critical thinking, technology, and decision making.⁹

What are 21st Century Skills?

In response to changes in culture, technology, and the workplace over the past two decades, federal and state policymakers have identified “21st Century Skills” as critical for success in a modern-day career. 21st Century Skills are the cognitive and affective abilities required to solve complex problems, collaborate and communicate effectively, acquire new skills independently, and adapt to changing conditions.¹⁰ 21st Century competencies include inter- and intra-personal skills that will help students prepare for today’s workplaces, such as critical thinking, creativity, leadership, flexibility, as well as information and media literacy.¹¹

Why are career readiness skills and work experiences important?

Career readiness skills relate to MCE’s workforce development goals along with the program’s aim to improve outcomes for youth and families in Maine. MCE cites as its impetus research that demonstrates how exposing young people to new experiences and possible careers contributes to improved lifetime earning potential and greater career satisfaction.¹² Research also suggests that the positive long-term impacts on future earnings are especially pronounced for students who face increased barriers to success.^{13,14,15} For example, a study that measured the impact of early work and its relation to job quality and earnings 8-10 years after high school graduation found that work-based learning experiences that incorporated positive relationships with adults, education credentials, and training were associated with higher-quality jobs at age 29 for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.¹⁶ Therefore, career exploration offers a framework for schools and community-based organizations to connect students to adults, expanding their social network and capital, and exposing them to experiences that will increase their employability. Furthermore, these connections foster confidence and self-efficacy for youth and can address disparities in access to networks and developmental adult relationships which otherwise limit opportunity for youth.

YEAR 1 PROGRAM OUTPUTS: BY-THE-NUMBERS

Children’s Cabinet Community-Based Organization (CBO)



* The Children's Cabinet pilot project was designed to support disconnected and under-represented youth in career exploration and meaningful paid work programming. The table above displays the demographics of young people who completed the job-readiness component of CBO programming as reported by program participants

Maine DOE Extended Learning Opportunity (ELO) Expansion

STUDENTS COMPLETING PAID EXPERIENCES

605

paid work experiences

For Credit

179

paid work experiences

Without Credit Attainment

784

paid work experiences

Completed in Total[†]

BUSINESS & COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

ELO programs reported ...

1,115

New Community and Business Partnerships

3,911

Engagements

between students and community/business partners for informal extended learning opportunities (like job shadows, guest speakers, and field trips)

POPULATIONS SERVED

55%–73%

of participants were

Disadvantaged Youth[‡]

CREDITS AWARDED

Core	37
Elective	937.25
TOTAL	974.25

[†] The true total number of completed ELO experiences is likely larger because the reports did not capture the number of completed unpaid credit-bearing ELO experiences.

[‡] These numbers represent estimates, not actual counts. Narrative responses in ELO grantee reporting indicate that ELO coordinators often do not have access to information about the socio-economic status of students participating in ELOs.

YEAR 1 PROGRAM OUTPUTS: BY-THE-NUMBERS

Jobs for Maine Graduates

(Program data related to supporting ELO Expansion)



§ MCEBs were offered through JMG staff and programming via the JMG portal of the Learning Management System (LMS), in addition to being offered by ELO coordinators at DOE-funded ELO sites via the ELO portal of the LMS.

¶ Maine students utilized the ELO portal of the LMS to participate in the MCEB or in Extended Learning Opportunities (ELOs) that were credit-bearing and/or paid experiences. These include students engaged in a DOE-funded ELO expansion site program, in addition to other ELO providers not funded by the grant.



MCE Evaluation Methodology

The Maine Career Exploration program's \$25 million investment was allocated across three funding streams: Jobs for Maine Graduates (JMG), Maine DOE, and Maine Children's Cabinet through grants administered by the Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD). The State of Maine engaged the Data Innovation Project (DIP) at the University of Southern Maine's Catherine Cutler Institute to design and execute an evaluation of the DOE ELO expansion project and the Children's Cabinet pilot project of CBO-provided career exploration programming. JMG conducted a separate evaluation of its MCE-funded efforts. The DIP evaluation, however, does consider and discuss the important role that JMG played in supporting ELO expansion efforts – findings which emerged from the ELO coordinator focus groups and the JMG program report counts.

The key points which are being considered by this evaluation focus on the impact of the paid meaningful career experience and supports offered by the Maine Career Exploration (MCE) program for the young people and employers who participate, in addition to the impact of the capacity building supports for the entities administering the program.

Approach

The Data Innovation Project employed a mixed method approach to gather formative and summative data about the first year of MCE programming. The approach included an online program completion survey for CBO- and ELO-engaged youth participants, a photovoice interview to create profiles featuring youth participants, focus groups with ELO and CBO coordinators, and an online survey for a subset of employers identified by ELO and CBO coordinators. The evaluation also includes information from program reports submitted by grantees of the Children's Cabinet pilot project and the Maine DOE ELO expansion project, which were

Primary research questions guiding the evaluation

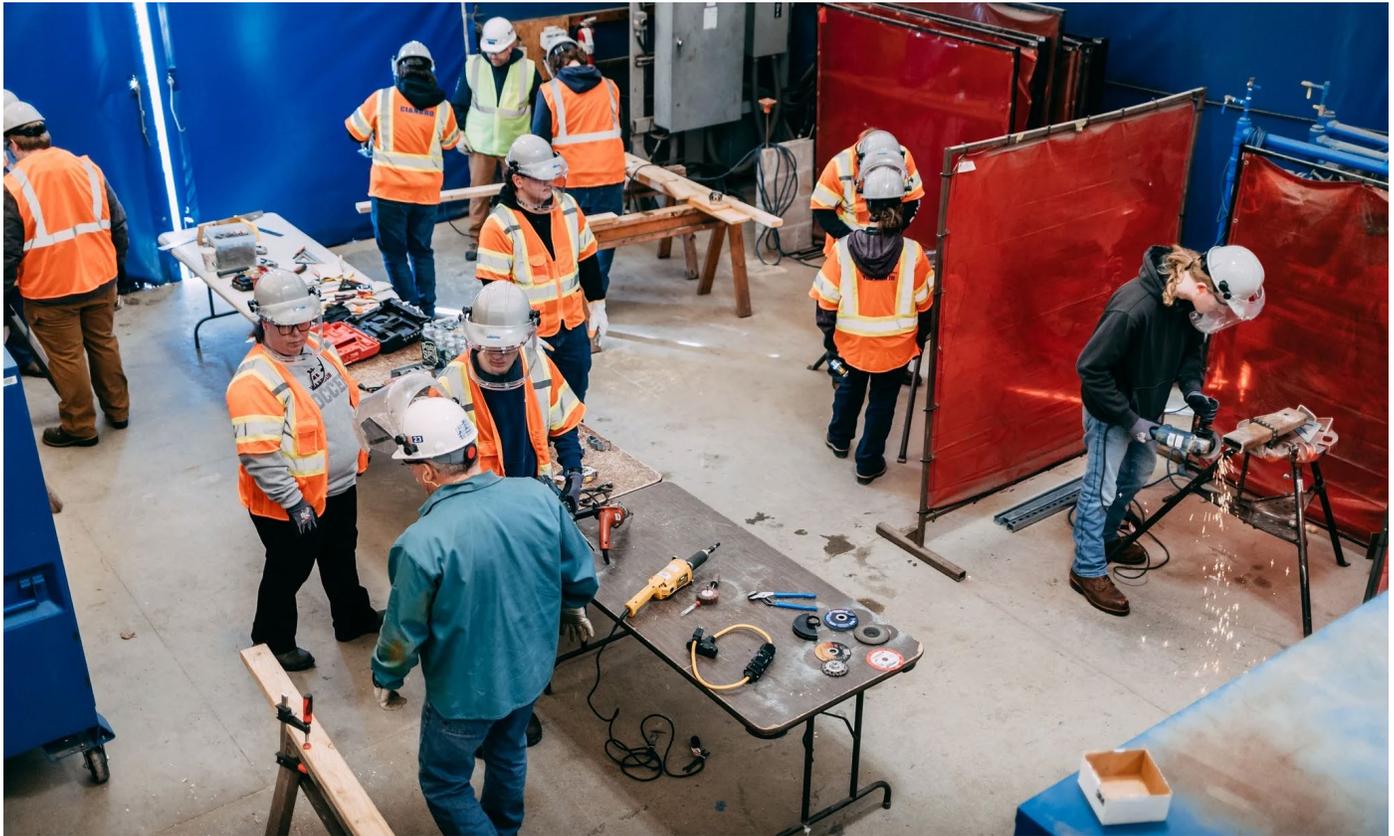
YOUTH PARTICIPANTS

- ➔ How does participating in paid work experience and support services change young people's career goals, post-secondary education plans, career-related skills, professional networks, and self-confidence?
- ➔ What supports are most important for young people to have a successful experience? For example, to what extent do course credits, wages, micro-credential opportunities, personalized outreach, wraparound supports, or other elements make a difference?
- ➔ Are programs engaging young people who would not otherwise have access to career-oriented paid work experience and supports?

EMPLOYERS

- ➔ How does offering meaningful work experience to youth benefit participating employers, such as through attracting talent or increasing productivity?
- ➔ What factors encourage, incentivize, support business participation? How important are wage subsidies?

What inhibits businesses from participating? What challenges have employers encountered when hosting young people through the Maine Career Exploration program?
- ➔ What supports are most important for employers to continue participating?



reviewed and compiled into aggregate counts. The emerging findings detailed in this report are based on the insights of those who responded to these evaluation activities. While this sample is representative of the larger population engaged in MCE programming, the findings should be viewed within this context.

The State of Maine identified the primary research questions for this evaluation and staff from the DECD and DOE engaged in regular status updates from the project team. While agency staff reviewed and approved evaluation tools prior to their implementation, they did not participate in surveys, interviews, data analysis, or the development of findings. All survey instruments and the larger research protocol were submitted to and received approval from the University of Southern Maine's Institutional Review Board prior to engaging subjects in the research. DIP evaluators used Qualtrics, a web-based survey software, to deploy surveys. Datafiles were downloaded from Qualtrics and analyzed with Excel and SPSS Statistics software. The evaluation team also transcribed focus group recordings and used NVivo 12 Pro software to code and analyze the findings for themes and trends. Details about each evaluation tool, data collection process, and characteristics about each sample are included below.

MCE Program Completion Survey

The MCE Program Completion Survey was designed to collect information from ELO- and CBO-engaged youth participants about their experience in the program. In April 2023, DIP evaluators provided ELO and CBO coordinators with a link to the online survey and coordinators distributed the survey to program engaged youth that were graduating, completing their HiSET, or were otherwise ineligible to participate in the experience again in the future. The survey remained open until the end of May 2023 and a total of 126 responses were submitted of which 109 were included in the evaluation. Survey participants came from 22 of the 31 different program sites and, of the 109 youth that completed a survey at the end of their MCE program experience, 81 (74.3%) were ELO-engaged youth while 28 (25.7%) were CBO-engaged youth. The ratio of ELO to CBO survey participants is reflective of the participant distribution, by program type and overall.

The majority of survey respondents (Table 3) indicated their age as 18-21 years old (63.4%), their racial identity as white (86.5%),ⁱⁱ and their gender identity as female (67.7%).ⁱⁱⁱ Additionally, 63 participants (64.3%) indicated that someone in their immediate family has attended college. There were notable demographic differences between the ELO- and CBO-engaged young persons in this sample. Specifically, the surveyed pool of CBO-engaged youth had a larger proportion of 16–17-year-olds (45.8%) compared to ELO-engaged youth (28.6%), even though CBO programming serves a wider age range of 16-24, compared to the 16–21-year-old age range for ELO program participants. This is likely due to the fact the ELO survey in year one focused on graduating seniors. Additionally, the pool of CBO-engaged participants had a larger proportion of youth that identified a race other than white with one out of three youth (33.3%) compared to one out of 10 (8.45%) ELO-engaged youth. Additionally, ELO-engaged participants (68.4%) more often reported that an immediate family member has attended college compared to CBO-engaged participants (50.0%).

MCE Focus Groups with ELO and CBO Coordinators

In June and July of 2023, all ELO and CBO coordinators were invited to participate in focus groups that asked them to reflect on program implementation success and challenges as well as their experience of program participants. Nineteen of 26 ELO coordinators participated while six CBO participants attended, representing four out of the five CBO program sites.

Fourteen of the 19 (73.7%) ELO programs identified as a new program site while five (26.3%) identified as a program that expanded because of MCE funding. Focus group attendance largely reflected the program’s

ii 13.5%, or 12 participants identified six non-white races or ethnicities which included Black, Biracial, Indian, Latina, Hispanic, and Asian.

iii Total responses for each demographic category ranged from 89 to 101.

iv Data are not being presented for categories with less than 5 responses, which includes gender identities other than male or female.

TABLE 3.

Youth survey respondents

AGE	
16-17	33
18-21	64
21-24	4
RACIAL IDENTITY	
Non-White	12
White	77
GENDER ^{iv}	
Female	63
Male	27

TABLE 4.

Employer survey respondents

BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION TYPE	
Non-profit	22
For-profit	22
Municipal/Quasi-governmental	8
INDUSTRY TYPE	
Education and Training	8
Health Science and Healthcare	8
Government and Public Administration	6
Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources	5
Architecture and Construction	4
Arts, Audio/Video Technology and Communications	4
Hospitality and Tourism	4
Animal Welfare and Veterinary	3
Finance and Accounting	2
Manufacturing	2
Social and Human Services	2
Childcare	2
Marketing, Sales and Service	1
Transportation, Distribution and Logistics	1

geographic spread and ELO program site types including schools and districts, CTE programs, community-based organizations, and a public university. Therefore, the groups of participating ELO coordinators were characteristic of the overall ELO program sites.

Three of the four participating CBO programs identified that this type of programming was new to their organization. The fourth site used MCE funding to expand an existing workforce program by increasing their geographic service area and by lowering the age of participant eligibility. The focus group participants were representative of the overall CBO organization types.

MCE Employer Survey

CBO and ELO coordinators were each asked to provide the evaluation team with contact information for up to ten employers that engaged in a CBO- or ELO-work experience. Throughout June and July 2023, evaluators invited 171 employers to participate in a survey and reached out by email and by phone. Fifty-nine employers from 30 different Maine towns and cities completed a survey. The geographic location of participating employers spanned the state, including employers located by the Canadian border, coastal island communities, and one New Hampshire based employer that abuts the Maine state line.

Of the employers that provided responses to the survey's questions about their business or organization type (n=52), an equal share (42.3%) identified as a non-profit (22) and for-profit (22), and the remaining 15.4% (8) as municipal/quasi-governmental (Table 4).

The sample of MCE-engaged employers included 14 different industries, with the most frequently reported categories being Education and Training (school, library or other educational); Health Science and Healthcare (medical, dental, emergency medicine, nutrition, etc.); Government and Public Administration; and Agriculture, Food, and Natural Resources (Table 4). Eight of 10 (83.0%) employers indicated they are a small business owner, meaning the business or organization employees 1-49 employees, while five (9.4%) selected the category 50-499 employees, and 4 (7.5%) indicated they have 500 or more employees. Finally, the majority of employers (63.8%) reported work experiences with one



youth, with 2-3 youth being the next highest category (22.4%), while the remaining 13.8% worked with four or more students.

Limitations

As with most program evaluations, the design of this evaluation is subject to limitations that are important to keep in mind while reviewing the findings. First, while relatively representative samples of program participants completed a survey, recruitment strategies may have resulted in selection bias. Specifically, employers and youth participants that had a positive program experience may have been more likely to agree to complete a survey when asked by a CBO or ELO coordinator or the evaluation team. Second, the number of youth participants and employers that completed a survey were a small sample of the overall population that engaged in MCE programming. Finally, because the data was self-reported, participants may have interpreted what the question were asking differently since program-related language varied from one school or community-based organization to the next. In particular, analysis showed that participants interpreted "paid" work experience inconsistently.

Emerging Findings

The following sections reflect the findings that emerged from the MCE participant surveys, employer survey and the coordinator focus groups. In some instances, program report counts are also referenced to contextualize the results. The findings are broken into two major subsections; the first section focuses on youth outcomes and experiences while the second highlights program implementation successes and lessons learned. Throughout the findings, youth profiles offer insight into the experiences and reflections of young people who benefitted from MCE-supported opportunities.

TABLE 5.

Summary of Maine Career Exploration Program Goals

	ELO PROGRAM	CBO PROGRAMS
SHARED GOALS	Supporting youth to gain a better understanding of career opportunities, valuable foundational and 21st Century skills, and meaningful connections to employers in our state.	
IMPLEMENTED BY	Schools or intermediary organizations	Community-based organizations
SERVES	Maine students, 16-22 years old	Maine youth, 16-24 years old
FUNDING	Maine DOE ELO Expansion grant	Maine Children’s Cabinet pilot program grant
PROGRAM SPECIFIC GOALS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Expand the number of ELOs offered (priority areas: paid work experiences, expanding educational opportunities in rural Maine) → Increase access for disadvantaged youth → Develop integrated, sustainable, effective statewide ELO support system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Develop and/or expand programming and supports needed to connect more Maine youth between the ages of 16 and 24 to meaningful paid work experiences. → Reach target populations including youth with disabilities, those connected to the juvenile justice system, those experiencing homelessness, those transitioning in or out of the foster care system, those with low-income, and youth of color and/or from indigenous communities.

As stated in the Methodology section, while the evaluation respondents are a representative sample overall, it is important to keep in mind that the views and experiences captured here are not reflective of all participant experiences and some views may be underrepresented. Additionally, unless it is otherwise stated, the detailed participant experience and program results between the ELO and CBO programs were the same, or not significantly different. It is explicitly noted when instances of meaningful difference were found between the program outcomes or implementation. Finally, the ELO and CBO programs goals are summarized in the figure opposite (Table 5) to provide grounding and context for this section.



Participant Outcomes for Year One MCE Program Participation

In the first year of programming, it appears that the Maine Career Exploration program yielded positive outcomes for participants in the short-term which have the potential to contribute to Maine’s workforce pipeline in the longer-term. Specifically, the findings indicate that program engagement is supporting improved academic experience and growth in targeted career-readiness skills, knowledge, abilities including greater awareness about career opportunities and pathways. The program also contributes to career clarity and increased employment for youth, including job offers. Lastly, coordinators observed growing social-emotional skills for many youth participants as well as increased hope for participants, families, and communities.

All around positive participant experience.

Across the board, ELO and CBO coordinators, youth participants, and MCE-engaged employers overwhelmingly reported positive participant experiences with the Maine Career Exploration program. Every employer (100.0%, 53 employers) that provided a survey response reported they would host a work experience again and almost 9 out of 10 (88.5%) were extremely likely or likely to recommend an MCE work experience to another employer. Employers identified several reasons why they would again host a work experience which centered on developing relationships and mentorships with youth, strengthening community partnerships, and engaging in learning that was mutually beneficial.

When youth were asked to rate statements about their program experience using a scale where 1 equaled strongly disagree and 4 equaled strongly agree, on average, they highly rated all factors (Figure 3), with the work site experience earning the highest rating average (3.7). The level of support I had at my work site was helpful and because of the program, I made connections to adults who can help me with my career goals each receiving the next highest averages.^v Youth participants used the open-ended response questions on the MCE program completion survey to provide specific examples. For instance, one youth wrote, “Before participating in this program, I was unsure of what I wanted to do after high school. Because of this program I was able to explore something that I am passionate about and completely change my career path and trajectory. I will be forever thankful for this program and all the things it has done for me.”

“

I support this program and think it is excellent way to integrate experience into student learning.

EMPLOYER

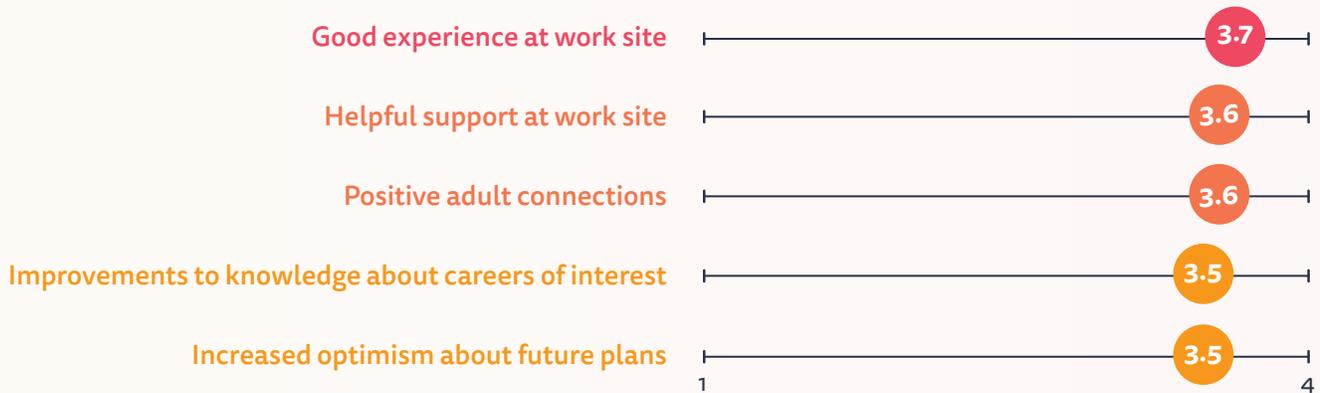
“

It is always wonderful to have extra hands and learn from our youth as we maintain our programming. Not only do participants learn from our organization, but they help us stay relevant.

EMPLOYER

FIGURE 3.

In general, **youth participants agreed that the MCE program experience included...**



^v There was minor variation between CBO and ELO participant ratings, with ELO participants giving slightly higher ratings, on average (from .09 to .36), for each factor.

“

Helped me see my future and helped me financially and got me into the work force, which I'm glad for, and hope you guys continue to help students and provide this amazing opportunity.

CBO-ENGAGED YOUTH

Many young people similarly described how this experience contributed to personal growth, like increased confidence, motivation, and self-efficacy and how the program helped them shape their future plans.

ELO and CBO coordinators shared that they too received a great deal of positive feedback directly from participants, so much so that one ELO coordinator stated, “Student testimonials... [are] so powerful ... and they definitely make me tear up quite a bit. It's really great seeing some youth find the light that they didn't see before and be excited about their future.”

Program engagement supports improved academic experience.

During the focus groups, both CBO and ELO coordinators spoke to specific ways in which the MCE program directly improved young people's academic experience. For instance, ELO coordinators said that for some students who were disengaged or struggling academically, the career exploration programming increased motivation to come to school, and even helped students earn credits to graduate. Some also described observing a reduction in absenteeism and behavioral issues among program participants.

Participating CBOs serve both in-school and out-of-school youth. Some CBO-provided MCE programs—LearningWorks YouthBuild, for example—include providing alternative education to participants and preparation for attaining a high school equivalency (HiSET) certificate. In fact, half of the CBO-engaged youth survey respondents reported *engaging in HiSET preparation*. In open response questions, CBO-engaged participants described how the supportive environment and alternative, hands-on approach were helpful and

had a positive impact on their educational experience. One young person wrote, “when I was at my old school, I wasn't learning anything so when I left and went to [the CBO Program], they have taught me a lot more and it's helpful.” Another expounded,

“I didn't think I would ever graduate, but they made it so easy and so fun to be able to learn and also do hands-on things to learn about what I needed to be able to graduate. I went in there with my head high and left with my head even higher. They really do an amazing job helping young adults and teenagers find their way in life.”

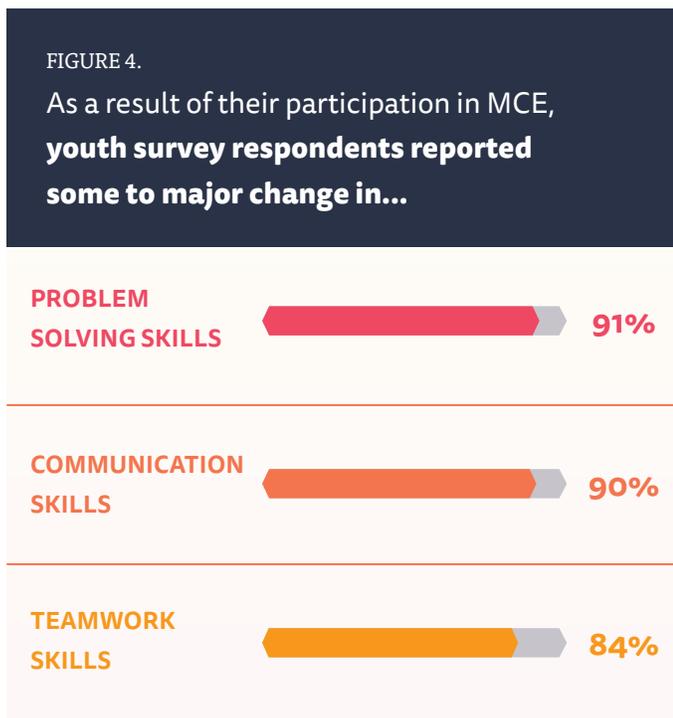
In the program completion survey, 41.3% of ELO-engaged respondents identified earning credits as a factor motivating participation. Program reports from DOE-funded ELO expansion sites, meanwhile, tally a total of 974.25 credits awarded to student participants across the state in year one of the program.

“

On the last days of the class [students] shared with us things like: *I only came to school because of this class. I didn't know what was out there. Even on days when I didn't like the class, I understood the importance of it. There was just so much positive feedback from students.*

ELO COORDINATOR

ELO coordinators in rural communities with small school districts said that one of the program’s critical impacts was enabling students to have hands-on electives or community-based learning opportunities that are otherwise unavailable. Filling this gap, they said, improved the academic experience and expanded opportunity for rural students. Meanwhile, college students who completed an ELO experience also said that the program impacted their academic experience, explaining in a few instances that the program increased their motivation to complete their post-secondary education program or increased their confidence in their choice of major.



“It’s been a great way for students to gain real-life, real-world, work experience and also learn about possible opportunities in their field of interest.”

EMPLOYER

“We don’t have electives in our schools. We just have core classes. And so just adding out other opportunities to engage kids and find meaningful ways for their learning is so crucial and important to keep kids in our communities and feel like they see themselves in our communities and just building out those connections.”

ELO PROGRAM COORDINATOR

Participation grows 21st Century and job-readiness skills and abilities.

Young people that participated in the program were asked to rate how much their skills, knowledge, or abilities changed due to participating in the career exploration program on a scale of *no change*, *some change*, and *major change*. Key 21st Century skills had very high percentages of participants who experienced at least some change (Figure 4). Nine of ten youth reported *some* or *major change* in their problem-solving (91.1%) and communication (90.1%) skills, while 84.2% reported a change in their teamwork abilities.

ELO and CBO coordinators frequently observed growth in young peoples’ job readiness skills and overall employability. They described a range of skills from resume-writing to how to quit professionally, interviewing skills, and developing good work habits through work experiences and job readiness training, like showing up on time and following direction. One CBO coordinator described this foundational competency as “*being able to be more effective employees, regardless of field.*” Likewise, youth participants recognized their own growing ability and preparedness to be employees. For instance, one CBO-engaged youth shared, “*I understand now how to work and keep a job for the long term.*”



Program-related engagement opportunities influence improved social-emotional skills.

In addition to 21st Century skills and job-readiness, MCE program participants frequently wrote about how the program helped them build related foundational skills, such as confidence and motivation, and in many cases, overcoming anxiety and other social-emotional challenges, especially as it relates to communication skills for job-seeking and the workplace. Examples shared by youth included an improved ability to talk to strangers, to communicate with adults and authority figures, and to engage successfully in teamwork and problem-solving. One youth shared, “I got out of my comfort zone and talked to people I would’ve never talked to because of anxiety.”

Although not a specific goal of the program, opportunities to engage other people, especially adults or community members, are of great importance because they bolster young people’s self-esteem and aptitude for taking on future challenges.¹⁷ In fact, during the focus groups, CBO and ELO coordinators most frequently discussed the remarkable growth they observed in confidence, self-esteem, empowerment, self-efficacy, motivation, self-awareness, and what one coordinator described as a “*greater understanding of themselves and their place in the world.*” Coordinators also witnessed participants grow the interpersonal and communication skills needed to find and maintain career opportunities. Both ELO and CBO coordinators described these social-emotional skills as important foundational capacities for overall job-readiness and as an area of high need since they have observed increased social-emotional challenges among youth in the wake of the pandemic.

“

We have a lot of young people that are very quiet and reserved and nervous when they first start, and they really get comfortable. It’s just amazing to see them blossom and gain that confidence — it’s what I notice right away.

CBO PROGRAM COORDINATOR

YOUTH PARTICIPANT PROFILE

Tiffany | Perseverance and patience

Noble High School ELO Program, York County, Maine

Work Experience Placement: Los Solano Ranch, North Berwick

Photo Prompt

Thinking back about what motivated her to participate in an Extended Learning Opportunity (ELO) at Los Solano Ranch, 16-year-old Noble High School student, Tiffany, explained, "I've always loved horses and wanted to ride them. My family isn't the wealthiest, and horses are expensive, so, I was like, okay, I'll go. And I just loved it. The first day I loved it, and I still love going."

The ELO Coordinator at Noble had actually established the Los Solano Ranch as an ELO option before knowing that Tiffany was interested. "We put it out there and she was like, sign me up!" recalled Leala, a teacher at Noble.

"You may think horses are scary because of how big they are. They're actually so calm," explained Tiffany. "And for me, I have a problem with anger, and I get a lot of anxiety, but it was so therapeutic for me, and it helped me calm down in so many ways. I don't know how to explain this, but it has helped me mature a lot more too."

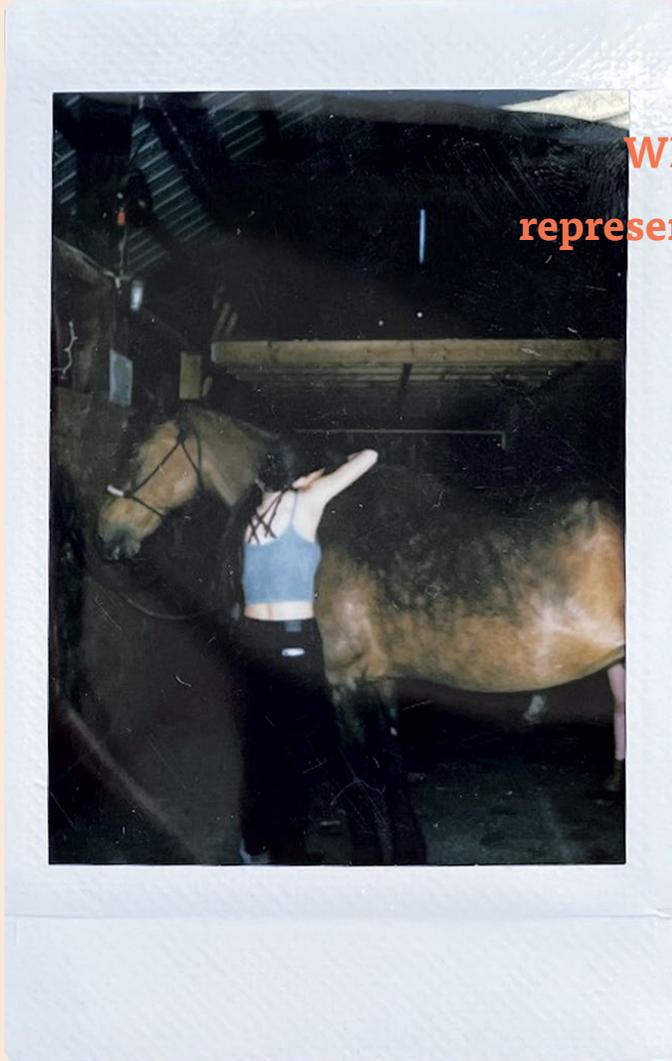
Laela also noticed the positive impact the experience was having on Tiffany. "She has grown in her emotional maturity immensely," she said. "At the beginning of this process, she was having difficulty remaining in class and identifying her emotions. Since her experiences at the ranch, she has been developing social-emotional skills that she can bring with her in her future career."

When asked about the skills she learned through her ELO experience, Tiffany talked about learning patience. "At first, I didn't understand that she [the horse] needed time to get to know who I was and learn that I'm a good person. It took several days and several weeks for me

A new connection you have made



“
This is me teaching my friend Nick how to braid Joe's hair. Joe is Matt's horse, and I am so happy he let me braid his hair.



Which photo do you think represents your project the best and why?

Photo Prompt

#|||||

“ |||||

This is when she finally let me hug her. That just shows that if you're patient enough, and you're willing enough, and you show that you actually want to try, then you can have that opportunity to make that connection. That's my favorite photo too.

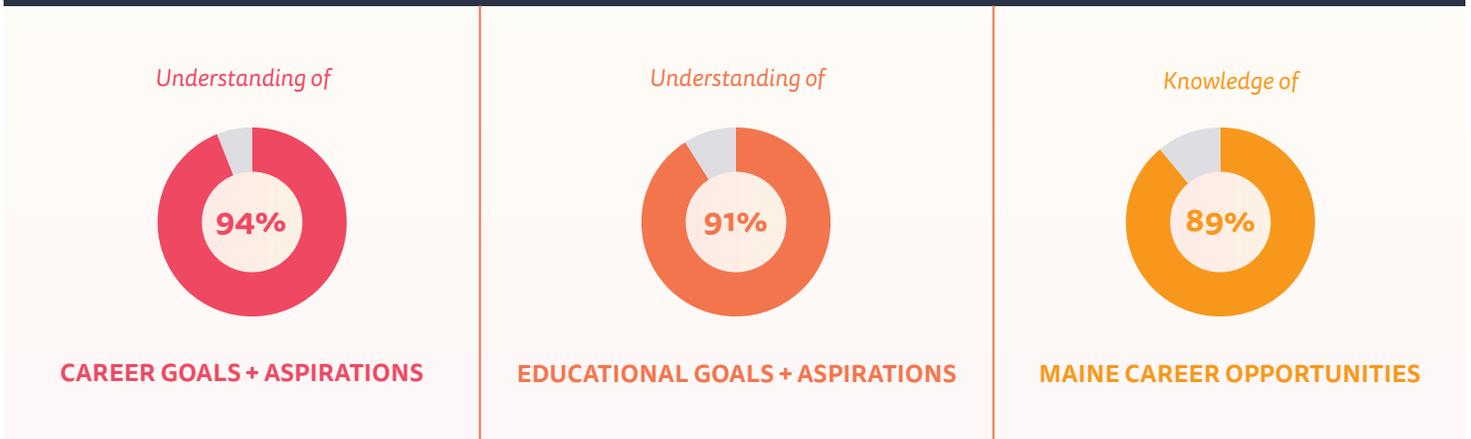
to gain her trust. And sometimes I get frustrated with why doesn't she like me, or why can't I learn this better? But, after a while, I learned it takes time and when I had more patience and was more gentle around her, she opened up more and we've grown a connection."

When asked about a strength she brought to the experience, Tiffany talked about perseverance and how that helped her overcome the challenges that come with learning new technical skills like putting on the horse's lead and getting on the horse without using steps. Matt and Deb, who run the ranch, were helpful too. "They were so kind to me. I'm just so grateful to be in the program."

Tiffany sees the potential for this experience to be helpful in the future too. "If I wanted a job opportunity to work with horses, it'll help me tell the people that that I've worked with horses before, and it will give me more of a chance to actually get the job." In the meantime, Tiffany plans to come back to the ranch in the summer. "My friend is going to do that too. Her horse and my horse are sisters, and we're best friends."

FIGURE 5.

As a result of their participation in MCE, **youth survey respondents reported some to major change in...**



MCE participation increases understanding and awareness of career and post-secondary opportunities.

According to survey respondents (Figure 5), nine out of ten youth reported some or major change in their understanding of their career (94.1%) and educational (91.1%) goals and aspirations as well as gaining awareness of career opportunities (89.1%). Importantly, the highest self-rated change of all the skill, knowledge, ability areas reported by participants (included in Figure 7 and 8) was their understanding of career goals and aspirations. Youth used open-ended responses to explain how hands-on, applied work experiences not only directly increased their awareness of opportunities but enabled them to develop skills and have experiences in their careers of interest – like woodworking, managing a classroom, and practicing elements of emergency medicine. For example, an ELO participant interested in the veterinary field explained, “I got firsthand experience of the point of view from a doctor and a vet tech which showed me there’s so many important jobs in this field.” Another ELO participant described, “after learning about the demands my community has for mental health and rehabilitation workers ... I want to be a part of it now more than ever.” Likewise, surveyed employers wrote about how the MCE program is, “educating our local area youth about the careers available to them” such as in the medical field, conservation, construction, and physical therapy as well as connecting youth to less well

known or understood career areas. For example, one employer explained, “As a municipal entity - we have a wide variety of career or employment opportunities that most young people might not recognize or understand. So, getting connected with students provides good exposure and highlights opportunities.”

Youth participants also detailed that they learned about the pathways, steps, and requirements for pursuing their career interests, including the job application process and increased knowledge of certification, training, and educational requirements. Likewise, ELO-engaged youth said engaging in the MCE program helped them visit colleges and learn about the college application process, financial aid, and budgeting. Participants that were already interested in college opportunities indicated that the program was most helpful in zeroing in on specifics like their college major or which college to attend.

“
 I have learned that there are more opportunities than I hear about from my peers and people in the community.

ELO-ENGAGED YOUTH



“

I've learned about so many more options other than college after high school. I've figured out what college I want to go to, and I've learned about the FAFSA that can help me go to the college I want. I've learned what to do if I'm unable to find a job, I know where to go. I've learned about trades, and many other career paths. I now have a lot more social skills and know how to speak to people I've never spoken to before. I understand questions I'm supposed to ask in an interview and what is expected of me. I've learned SO much.

ELO-ENGAGED YOUTH

YOUTH PARTICIPANT PROFILE

Taylor W. | Local mentor sparks passion and connects student to new opportunities

Deer Isle-Stonington High School ELO Program, Project Launch, Hancock County, Maine

Work Experience Placement: **Local Freelance Artist, Jadya LaDeau** ([artist's website](#))

"That's me and Jadya," Taylor said, pointing to one of the photos she took to capture her career exploration experience her senior year at Deer Isle Stonington High School (DISHS). "Actually, it's kind of a funny story. I didn't want to do an internship ... and then, I went the first day and Jadya and I immediately clicked, and I was having fun, and I was also just getting my love for art back."

DISHS Extended Learning Opportunity (ELO) Coordinator, Chelsea Brown, knew Taylor was hesitant to participate in an ELO. She also knew that Taylor had an interest in art but had lost some motivation. Reflecting on that time, Chelsea explained, "My mind went to Jadya, who I went to high school in Deer Isle with, and it seemed like the perfect fit." Jadya LaDeau is a freelance artist focused on oil and gouache painting who lives and works on the island. "They developed such a great mentoring relationship that it was probably one of our best matches within the program."

Now, nearing graduation, Taylor reflected on her weekly ELO experience that spanned most of the school year. "That's a photo of me working on a painting," Taylor explained, pointing to another photograph she took. "I struggle with both portraiture and oil painting, so it was kind of something that I needed guidance through, and she helped me with both of those things."



Photo prompt:

**A connection you've
made**

Photo prompt:

A skill I've learned



In addition to improving her painting skills, Taylor learned from Jadyn about the day-to-day reality of being a freelance artist, including some of the financial and logistical elements, like earning income from commissions and setting up gallery shows. She also had the opportunity to visit museums and galleries. “That was a huge resource for me because I have never really been the kind of person to go to museums.”

Importantly, it was also Jadyn who enabled Taylor to visit Smith College. She had applied and been accepted but had only seen the college in pictures. “I never had the resources to visit Smith before,” Taylor explained. “I was telling her [Jadyn] about this, and she was like, well, there’s a museum over there that I want to go see anyways. Why don’t we make a trip out of it?”

And so, they did. The two visited Smith College and its Museum of Art. “They had an original Picasso and an original Van Gogh!” Taylor exclaimed. Ultimately, she decided to attend Smith and will start this fall with a minor in art. She plans to use the museum as a resource. “I’ll definitely utilize it more than I would have before this internship,” she explained.

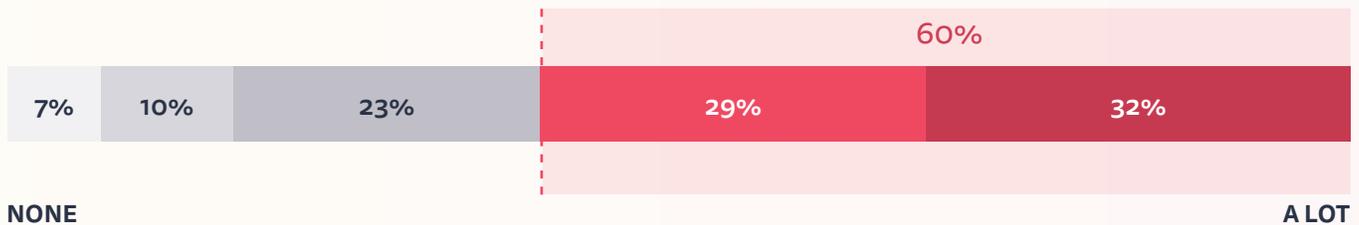


Career exploration increases career clarity and shapes future plans.

Coordinator focus groups and youth survey responses described a range of ways in which the MCE program increased career clarity for participants. In many cases, the experience was a decisive factor in shaping and determining future plans for youth across the state. For some young people, this meant starting to plan for their future for the first time, while others said that learning about options in their field of interest helped them narrow their focus and select a pathway to pursue. In other cases, the hands-on experience helped them realize that their field of interest was not the right fit for them after all. For example, one young person learned that teaching was more difficult than it looked and reflected, *“I should be more prepared when getting into something I don’t know anything about.”* Coordinators overwhelmingly agreed that learning what they did not like was just as valuable as finding the right fit. As one ELO coordinator put it, *“I consider that a success! You’ve just saved them years of their life going down a dead end.”*

FIGURE 6.

More than half (60.4%) of youth survey respondents said that the program had a significant impact on their future plans.



When asked on a 1 to 5 scale, with 1 being not at all and 5 being a lot, “how much did participating in the MCE program impact your future plans?,” more than half (60.4%) of youth participants selected a rating of 4 or 5 for the impact (Figure 6).^{vi} While all ELO and CBO coordinators shared specific examples of how the program helped youth shape their future plans, one ELO coordinator summarized the range of impacts she had observed in a way that spoke to the depth and breadth of MCE program outcomes,

“Some of the biggest successes of our program are hard to quantify. [One youth] got his first job; [another] got into her dream school because of someone she met during her internship; [a participant] wrote a business plan with an SBA mentor and is now supporting himself with his own scrap-metal business; [another] turned his internship at the fire department into a career path and is studying fire science at EMCC; [one youth] discovered she has a talent for marketing and is considering new career paths.”

^{vi} Figures were rounded to improve readability and, as a result, do not add up to 100 percent.

When asked about their future plans, over half (57.4%) of MCE participants indicated they planned to start college in the future, while 17.8% were planning to look into college (Table 6). Three out of ten participants (30.7%) were planning to start a job, while 28.7% planned to look for a job. Almost a fourth of participants (23.8%) planned to start their own business. Training certificate programs, volunteering, technical school, the military, and apprenticeships were less common plans for participants.

TABLE 6.

FUTURE PLANS

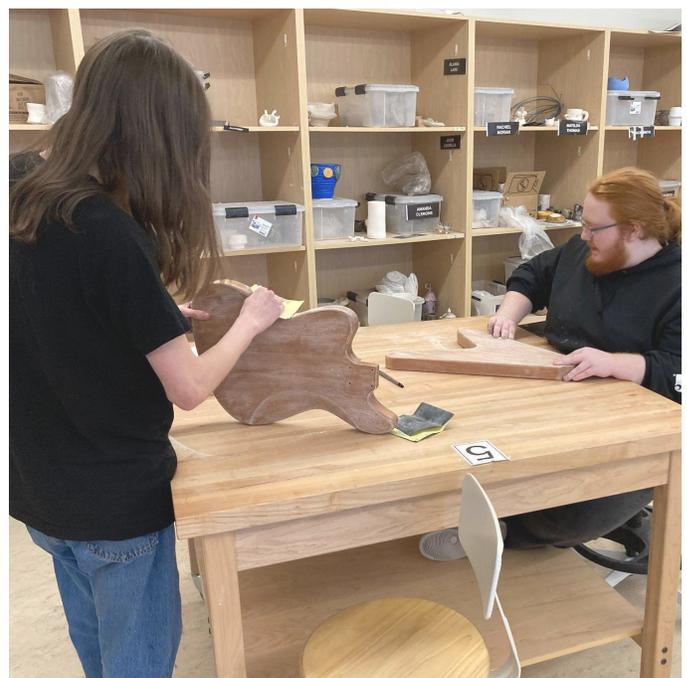
Start college	57.4%
Start a job	30.7%
Look for a job	28.7%
Start own business	23.8%
Look into college	17.8%
Training certificate program	10.9%
Undecided	8.9%
Volunteer	7.9%
Technical school	6.9%
Military	5.9%
Apprenticeship	5.0%

Career exploration builds hope for participants, families, and communities.

Youth survey responses demonstrated that the MCE program experience sparked young people’s excitement and optimism about their future. For example, one ELO participant shared, the program “Helped me see my future,” while another wrote, “Before this experience, I felt very stressed and hopeless about my education/career plan. Now I am excited for what comes next, and I feel very grateful to have a local group supporting my journey.” A CBO participant, meanwhile, wrote that the program “made me think that anything is possible with a positive mindset and hard work.”

CBO and ELO coordinators also observed how the program’s positive impact on young people has a ripple effect which benefits families and communities by extending a powerful sense of opportunity and hope for the future. One ELO coordinator shared how an end of the year presentation on work experiences galvanized their small community. She stated, “50 to 60 people – which is big for our school – came out to watch [the presentation] and the kids were beaming. They knew what they did was really important, not just to our school, but to our local community, where we’re small and rural and need more kids to come back and join our workforce. So, it’s been really huge for our school and our community.” Another ELO coordinator observed the MCE program impact, not just a student, but a whole family. They explained,

“One young man in particular thought he really knew what he wanted to do after high school, and after experiencing his ELO, he said, ‘absolutely not, this is not what I thought it was going to be every day.’ He went back to his original passion, which is for the ocean and applied to [a college in Maine], was accepted, and will be going there in the fall... To do that he has to pass a drug test upon getting to campus. He and his whole family have struggled with substance abuse, and they are all sobering up together to support him in that effort.”



MCE program participation leads to job offers.

Youth and employer survey responses and coordinator focus group comments all indicated that MCE work experiences often lead to job offers. Just over one-third (35.6%) of young people that were surveyed indicated that they received a job offer as a result of participating in the work experience. Of these, 25 (71.4%) accepted the job they were offered. Meanwhile, two out of five (39.6%) employers that completed a participant survey reported they offered a job to a young person with 10 out of the 21 employers hiring at least one former participant once the work experience ended. ELO and CBO coordinators also frequently shared examples of youth participants receiving job offers because of their MCE work experience. For example, an ELO coordinator described an instance where seven out of nine ELO schoolyear work placements turned into regular summer jobs for youth after they completed the program.

Interestingly, although the sample size is small, it appears that paid experiences may lead to paid work (Figure 7), as youth MCE program participants that reported a paid work experience were more likely to be offered a job (41.3%) compared to those that reported they were unpaid (26.8%). These youth were also more likely to accept the position (76.9%, compared to 45.5% who engaged in an unpaid experience). CBO-engaged youth were slightly more likely to be offered a job (40.7%, 11 youth) than ELO-engaged youth (33.8%, 26 youth), and were also more likely to accept that job (72.7%) than ELO-engaged youth (65.4%).

FIGURE 7.

Paid MCE experiences resulted in **more jobs offered and more jobs accepted.**

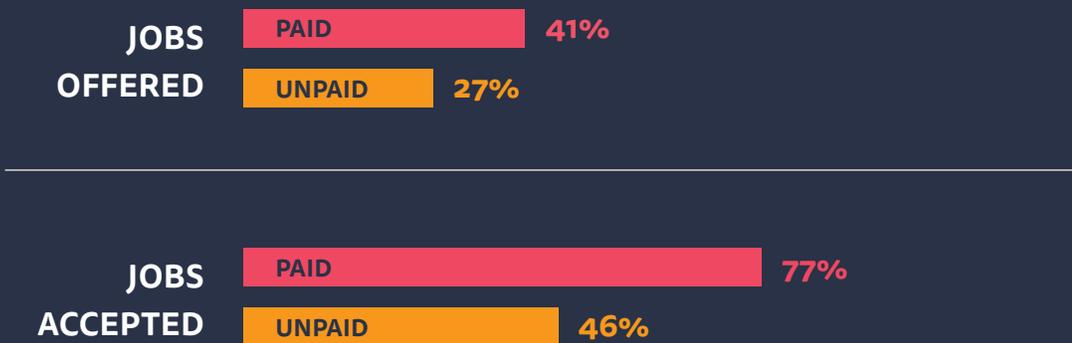


FIGURE 8.

As a result of their participation in MCE, **employer survey respondents reported moderate to major benefits for their business/organization in...**



MCE work experiences are contributing to a workforce pipeline.

In addition to many participants receiving job offers, coordinators shared that youth were regularly encouraged by MCE-engaged employers to come back to work for them after completing high school or college, suggesting longer-term benefits to the workforce pipeline. From the coordinator perspective, having youth participants become part-time or full-time employees was the biggest benefit of MCE program participation for employers – both in the short and long-term. One ELO coordinator described creating future employee connections as “*our way of giving back*” to employers who hosted a work experience for young people. Additionally, multiple coordinators said that programs that cover workers’ compensation and liability provide a significant benefit to employers because they create a low-risk opportunity to train and connect with young people for future workforce development.

Employers also viewed the MCE program as a workforce development pipeline in the longer-term. When asked about the extent to which they believed hosting a work experience(s) yielded benefits to their business or organization, seven out of ten employers (71.2%) thought it yielded a *moderate* or *major* benefit of attracting talent to industries/fields (Figure 8). Employers also identified that it provided them with information about the next workforce generation’s skills (65.4%) and helped address workforce shortages (56.3%).



Implementation Successes

The previous section demonstrated that the Maine Career Exploration program is connecting Maine's youth and employers through meaningful work experiences and expanding access to career exploration through responsive program models and support services to meet the diverse needs of youth. This section describes the various program implementation factors and specific program supports for youth participants, program coordinators, and MCE-engaged employers that helped to bring about these positive results.

Helpful Program Components & Supports for Youth Participants

Intensive and consistent support from adults

In open-ended survey responses, both ELO and CBO youth participants overwhelmingly cited supportive adults as a key element that helped them stay engaged and be successful in the program. Youth detailed how CBO coordinators and program staff, ELO coordinators, teachers, and work site supervisors or mentors offered support that was positive, encouraging, and flexible in a way that responded to their individual needs. Youth survey responses repeatedly described consistent communication, including frequent check-ins, in particular, as the factor that encouraged them to stay motivated to complete the program, especially when challenges arose. For instance, a CBO-engaged participant described, *"I was giving up on my work and they pushed me not to,"* while an ELO-engaged participant shared, *"My ELO coordinator has been very hands on and optimistic about the opportunities I've been given. Whenever I've gotten stuck, she's helped me move on to the next thing and I've really enjoyed working with her."*

While supportive adult connections are a pillar of the MCE program, CBO programs were designed to serve young people who face more complex challenges overall and require a more intensive level of support from staff as a result. As one CBO coordinator explained, *"The biggest support for our participants is personnel support, having people there to be able to take a walk and talk one-to-one and try and get to the bottom of what their challenges are and how to help them overcome them ... helping navigate 'when life gets in the way' situations."* CBO coordinators shared examples of support, like communicating with an employer when a participant experienced a mental health crisis so that the youth could maintain their position or supporting participants as they navigated challenging family dynamics or the juvenile justice system. Open response survey comments from CBO participants describe these supportive adult relationships as, for instance, *"Having support no matter what,"* and *"they accepted me into their family day one."*

CBO coordinators also said that the support service funds in the Childrens' Cabinet grant enabled them to provide a range of additional, impactful support like transportation resources and work supplies (e.g., steel-toed boots or professional clothing). CBOs also integrated other social service and mental health supports, like a community resource navigator to connect youth with resources in the area and a drop-in group run by local licensed social workers. These services provided youth with much-needed wraparound services, served as a recruitment and referral pipeline, and benefitted the community at-large by increasing collaboration across youth service providers.

YOUTH PARTICIPANT PROFILE

Akeem | Landing the perfect first job

Tree Street Youth, Androscoggin County, Maine

Work Experience Placement: Lewiston Recreation Department

Nineteen-year-old Akeem of Lewiston is one of many Maine Career Exploration (MCE) participants who landed a job as a result of his experience in the program. Explaining how he got involved in the program, Akeem said, "At first, I was scared to do it because I never had a job. But after doing the internship, I actually felt like I belonged here."

It was Roy, the coordinator of the PINE program at Tree Street Youth, a community-based organization program site of MCE, who connected Akeem with the internship opportunity at Lewiston Recreation. The PINE program offers paid meaningful career exploration opportunities, job-readiness and financial literacy training, peer support, and one-on-one support from staff throughout the work experience.

Reflecting on the impact he observed the program have, Roy said, "I saw many young people earn their first real paycheck and grow as employees. I saw some that struggled with waking up or being on time grow and mature and become reliable employees that were

eventually hired on after their work experience."

For Akeem, that's just what happened. After the internship ended, Lewiston Recreation offered him a full-time job as a summer camp counselor, and he gladly accepted. His favorite part of the job is working with the kids. "The kids here are just really important," he explained. "I can't think about the Rec without them." Akeem said he's learned a lot through the experience too. "It's taught me a lot of things about maturing, because I just got out of high school, so I've still got a little kid in me. So, it's just helping me grow a bit and just preparing me for a lot of things."

When asked about what advice he would share with other young people, Akeem said, "I'm probably not the only one who is scared to work. A lot of people are kind of scared to get their first job." He encouraged others not to be afraid and said that for a first job, the camp counselor role is "the perfect job to get, because you can act like a kid, but you also need to act grown."



YOUTH PARTICIPANT PROFILE

Fane | A summer job that supports future goals

Tree Street Youth, Androscoggin County, Maine

Work Experience Placement: Kennedy Pool, Lewiston

Seventeen-year-old Fane also found a summer job through Tree Street's PINE program at Kennedy Pool in Lewiston. "It's really good working there ... I'm an aquatic aid, like checking people in, making sure they have the right information and all that stuff" Fane explained.

She spent about six hours a day, 3-4 days a week at his summer job, depending on the weather. Her days typically started with cleaning up and getting organized, and then attending to community members and helping kids, before readying the space for the next day.

Roy at Tree Street connected her with the job. "Roy helped me out a lot. He helped me get the information that I need to get the paperwork done, even if I'm late about it." From Roy's perspective, it's the intensive support from staff that is key to the success of the PINE program. "It's huge," Roy explained, "being able to walk them through any challenging situations that they aren't sure how to handle."

When asked about how the experience supports her future goals, Fane explained, "It actually helped me a little bit because I want to be a teacher, so it helped me understand what the kids actually do and their behavior." She'd recommend the experience to other students, too. "If you want to be outside and everything, you should just go for it and enjoy because its summer."





YOUTH PARTICIPANT PROFILE

Cave | Pride and belonging at work

Tree Street Youth, Androscoggin County, Maine

Work Experience Placement: Forage Market, Lewiston

"I still have a video of when I got the job," explained 17-year-old Cave, thinking back to when he started working at Forage Market in Lewiston a year ago. "Basically, it's this video of me walking out of the interview and they were like, we'll contact you soon! But I had a good energy about it, so in the video I'm like, I got the job! And I was just so happy because it's just good work. I was really happy to work there."

Like Fane, Cave started out in the PINE program working at the Kennedy Pool for the summer and then the program connected him with a longer-term job opportunity as a dishwasher at Forage Market. Pointing to some of the pictures Cave took to capture his work experience, he laughed and explained, "I might have taken pictures of the sink three times, but there's a reason why, because it was very clean, and I wanted to show how I work."

Cave explained that the work he does at Forage Market makes him feel proud. Most of all, he's happy to have found the opportunity after a bad experience at another job. "It's a really good job. They're very LGBTQ+ [friendly] and they have a good work environment ... it's a good community."



Cave explained that in addition to gaining job-readiness skills through the program like, “learning how, even on days when you’re feeling low energy, to push through it and get it done,” the program also helped him get important documentation needed to be able to work. “I didn’t have my birth certificate or my student I.D.,” he explained. “But they helped me with getting those identifications so I could get jobs in the future, and I still have those papers which really help me out, because if I didn’t, I would be really messed up because I wouldn’t be able to get a job.”

When asked what advice he would share with other young people, Cave replied, “I would say if you had the chance to do the PINE program, I would, because they will literally hook you up with a good job!”



ELO groups and CBO cohort approaches

While many career exploration opportunities paired one youth with a business or organization, coordinators also described using multi-youth ELO groups and CBO cohort approaches to make career exploration accessible and relevant to more young people. These multi-youth approaches were created by coordinators to help youth who needed more support or were less prepared for a work experience. Youth who benefitted from a group or cohort approach were often under 18, faced social-emotional challenges, or lacked prior work experience. For example, a CBO coordinator described, *“We’re starting with a kind of a new model, which I’m excited about. I’m sending them in pairs. So, I have one younger employee who’s 16-17 and needs a lot more support and I’m sending him with an older 21-year-old ... who’s much more confident and can help bridge the gap between the younger employee and the staff.”*

Additionally, ELO coordinators said that group and cohort approaches helped them find more work experience opportunities for youth in rural areas, where transportation access in an issue, because it was easier to arrange transportation for a group than for each individual. CBO and ELO coordinators also said that group experiences increased access to work experiences in the trades and other hard-to-place industries that require more supervision for youth. For example, an ELO Coordinator created a group trade industry ELO that paired the JMG learning management system with weekly field trips to attract and engage students who were not otherwise interested in an ELO experience:

“We offered a trades ELO for a group of students this year and there’s a couple of individuals that left with like, ‘Hey, in a couple of years, when you’re able, please come back and apply for jobs.’ Just seeing the pride in these students that they were able to have ... We will always have the students who are motivated and come to see us and want to get involved in an opportunity, but this was a group of students that it really felt nice that we were able to offer them something that really was life changing.”

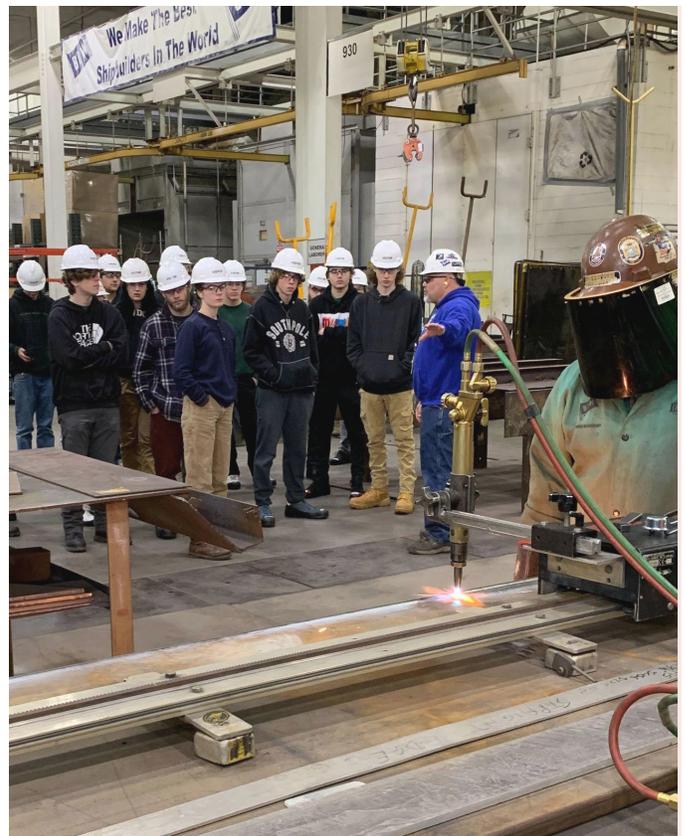
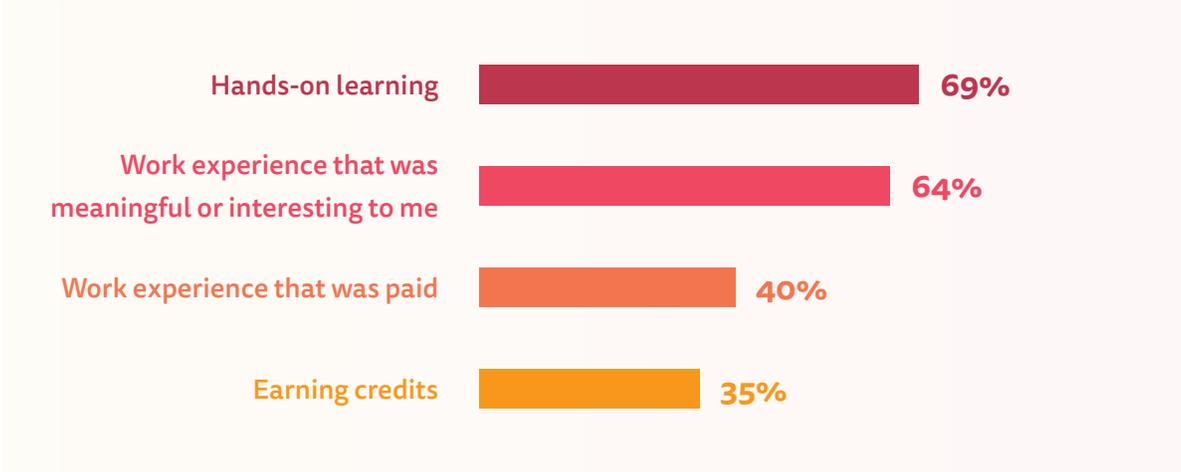


FIGURE 9.

Youth participants report being **motivated to participate in the program by...**



Hands-on, guided learning and meaningful work

Hands-on learning and meaningful work experience are cornerstones of the MCE program. Youth survey findings indicate that these are also highly motivating factors for participation (Figure 9). Approximately two out of three ELO- and CBO-engaged youth reported that their motivation to participate in the MCE program was to gain hands-on learning (68.5%) and to have a meaningful or interesting work experience (63.9%). Interestingly, those *without* a paid work experience reported hands-on learning as more motivating to their participation than those *with* a paid work experience (79.1% and 61.5% respectively). There was not a similar distinction for meaningful work. Additionally, hands-on learning opportunities were slightly more motivating for ELO-engaged youth (70.0%, 56 youth) than CBO-engaged youth (64.3%, 18 youth).

In open response comments on the youth survey, ELO participants also identified the ELO model of guided reflection and the integration of field and classroom experience as factors that helped them stay engaged in the program and apply their learnings to their own lives. Specifically, several students mentioned the helpfulness of worksheets and writing assignments associated with ELO activities like field trips and guest speakers since, as one youth put it, *“the worksheets also helped give the lessons a purpose and absorb more info.”* Others said being interested in what they were doing made it easy to stay engaged and several described the experience as empowering, *“I loved being treated equally as an adult, it encouraged me to dedicate my time and learning to my internship.”*

“

I like the more hands-on approach to ELO. We also had to take notes and complete worksheets during job tours, which helped to pay attention and care a lot more about what I was learning about.

CBO-ENGAGED YOUTH

YOUTH PARTICIPANT PROFILE

Hallie | Hands-on learning cultivates lifelong skills

Deer Isle-Stonington High School ELO Program, Project Launch, Hancock County, Maine

Work Experience Placement: Yellow Birch Farm, Deer Isle, Maine

"I love telling people about the farm!" 17-year-old Hallie of Deer Isle exclaimed, describing Yellow Birch Farm where her Extended Learning Opportunity (ELO) work experience took place. "One of my favorite parts was eating lunch there, because we would just have a big salad every single time. If I want a salad, then I can go pick the lettuce!"

Her interest in farming started during the summer after her freshman year at Deer Isle-Stonington High School (DISHS) when she toured farms in the area through another program and first discovered Yellow Birch Farm. So, when Chelsea, the DISHS ELO Coordinator, reached out about the opportunity to participate in an ELO during her senior year, Hallie already knew where she wanted her work experience to take place.

Through the ELO program, Hallie worked at the farm for five hours every Friday for six months – long enough to see the way that the farm tasks change with the seasons. The pictures she took of her experience capture a variety of tasks – milking goats, making cheese, carrying hay bales, and labeling the farm's packaged products to prepare them for sale.

When asked how she would describe the experience to others, Hallie said, "I've been calling it an internship, emphasizing that it is a class and we're doing work along with it to get credit for school." The combination of hands-on learning through work experience along with classroom instruction is a key component of ELOs.

Every Friday before going to work at the farm, Hallie went to her ELO class taught by Chelsea. "We learned not just about our internships specifically, but we did lessons about other real-world knowledge, like how to write a resume, how to send a professional email, and time management. I liked doing the lessons because I never had an official resume, but now I do," she explained.

In addition to the career-readiness skills developed through the ELO class, mentorship from the farm's owner, Missy, played an important role in the success of Hallie's experience. As Chelsea explained, "Missy allowed the students to see different aspects of what it is like to work on the farm and how to be sustainable. She allowed Hallie to have different experiences and learn new skills that are lifelong skills not just for her future career."

After graduating from DISHS, Hallie plans to go on to college and study environmental science. She's considering going into environmental policy and said she thinks her hands-on farming experience will help. "I think having this physical embodiment of the science stuff I'm learning – doing it in practice, farming – it changes your perspective on things. Especially if you go into the policy side. It's like, I'm making these policies for people to listen to, and I've got experience on both ends."

Photo prompt

A skill you've learned



Hallie making cheese at Yellow Birch Farm in Deer Isle, Maine.



Pay as an incentive and an equalizer

While pay was not a primary motivating factor for youth survey respondents (see Figure 12. above), it was more important to CBO respondents than ELO respondents (46.4% compared to 37.5%). Still, open-ended survey responses from participants overall, mentioned the positive impact of pay on the experience. Youth described how pay incentivized or enabled participation or motivated them to stay engaged and complete the experience. Youth also shared how pay helped them meet current financial needs while increasing their understanding and awareness of career and post-secondary opportunities. For instance, an ELO participant wrote, *“This program helped me pay for my life while also exploring my career path.”*

ELO and CBO coordinators described how pay was also an equalizer for young people since it expanded access to career exploration. One ELO coordinator shared, *“The biggest benefit is it brings students who otherwise wouldn’t be able to participate—they are disengaged, economically disadvantaged, etc.— into the program. It becomes a way to work with some of our most challenging students in a way that really transforms their attitude of school.”* Coordinators also shared examples that illustrated that the importance and impact of pay varied across individual circumstances of young people and families. For example, an ELO coordinator described, *“The first semester that I did this work, I had a lot of really great parent advocates who signed their kids up for this class, and most of them just did not care about payment at all, which kind of goes along with maybe more privilege. I had this past semester more students that had more barriers. They did absolutely care about getting paid.”* CBO and ELO

coordinators said that the program model impacted the importance of pay as well. For example, an ELO coordinator of a program focused on students earning credits to graduate said that earning credits was more important than earning pay for the students she worked with.

A few ELO coordinators also detailed how receiving compensation incentivized students to invest their time in long-term career planning over the short-term gains of a higher paying job. For example, an ELO coordinator in a rural fishing community said, *“kids are out fishing and really would not be motivated to be doing ELOs, except for I built in with my grant student stipends. And even though it’s not much for these fishing kids it supports them to look at their career paths differently or gain knowledge. It definitely changed the way I was able to engage with kids and support them.”* Similarly, another ELO coordinator said of pay, *“It is not competitive, but it’s still something as opposed to saying, no, don’t go work \$20 an hour at Walmart, come do this for free.”*

For CBO programs that primarily serve low-income youth, pay had a meaningful impact on helping make ends meet. As one CBO coordinator said, *“A lot of our youth are pretty independent, and so they really do require the resources that potentially these funds provide.”* Another CBO coordinator on the topic of pay, exclaimed, *“I feel like it’s everything! We work with such low-income families that just having those kids earn some kind of money is a benefit to the whole family.”*



Transportation

Transportation support is critical for expanding program access for young people from low-income backgrounds and in rural areas. With that in mind, despite significant challenges, CBO and ELO coordinators were creative and persistent in finding solutions. A mid-coast ELO program utilized a local cab company, a rural ELO coordinator based out of a community organization drove students herself, some partnered with a CBO career exploration program that was able to provide transportation, and others used the transportation dollars in their grant funding to reimburse students for mileage or cover the cost of drivers' education. A handful of youth and CBO and ELO coordinators also identified that covering the cost of drivers' education was a big incentive for young people to participate and a resource with potential long-term benefits, improving access to opportunity into the future.

In the focus group, an ELO coordinator reflecting on the impact of transportation support, said, *"Between the stipend and the mileage, it enabled students who otherwise would not have been able to afford to get to their ELO site to be able to do that. So, I think in terms of the equity piece, it did help bring some students on board who otherwise wouldn't have been able to."* Overall, while transportation was identified as the primary challenging facing the MCE program, which is further explored below, it is important to highlight the creative transportation successes that helped combat this substantial barrier.

“

They helped me get started with driving and a very good internship with the career path I want.

CBO-ENGAGED YOUTH

YOUTH PARTICIPANT PROFILE

Jeremiah | Building connection

Narraguagus High School, Healthy Acadia ELO Program Coordination, Washington County, Maine

Work Experience Placement: Group ELO at the Downeast Institute

A marine research laboratory, hatchery, and education center in Beals, Maine



Narraguagus High School senior, Jeremiah of Cherryfield, Maine, already knew what field he wanted to go into. “I’ve always liked marine animals and I’ve always wanted to do marine biology,” he explained. He had his plans for college in place too. He would be pursuing a degree in ecology at UMaine Machias the following year, feeling that a more generalized degree path was more practical. But with a focus on getting a job after college, he knew he wanted to get hands-on experience in the field first.

Jeremiah described wondering, “Is there any way I can get internships or do anything else in the meantime, so I can get experience to say that I have done ecology work?” The challenge was, he lived about 30 minutes from the coast, where that experience would be

available, and did not have access to transportation. “I can’t drive. I don’t have a car,” he explained. “There’s no way somebody like me is going to be able to do this with no transportation in mind.” But, with the help of Healthy Acadia ELO Coordinator, Corrie Hunkler, they were able to find Jeremiah an Extended Learning Opportunity (ELO) in his field of interest and arrange for transportation to address what Corrie described as a “barrier to trying to access opportunities outside your immediate community.” Corrie and an aquaculture teacher from the local CTE program, personally provided transportation for Jeremiah and another student to make that access possible. Corrie’s role is focused on bringing ELO opportunities to schools in rural, coastal Washington County – a job that’s all about

Photo Prompt

A skill I've learned



“ [Building] a medium for clams and oysters to be able to grow on and mature on so they can grow to a decent size.

building local connections. It was a field trip to the Downeast Institute (DEI), a marine research laboratory, hatchery, and education center in Beals, Maine, that led to Jeremiah’s internship opportunity. “While I was there, I made a connection with the associate director,” Corrie explained. “With the students we planned out a group ELO together – so this was student and employer created. The employer was hands-on and supported engaging students in meaningful work and making it fun.”

Through the group ELO experience at DEI, Jeremiah made new friends and made important connections in the marine ecology field that could lead to job opportunities in the future. “It’s a good way of getting experience with the company, with the people that work there that actually hire people,” he explained. “Getting a connection with them, having them know that you’re worthwhile, that can help in the long run for an internship later down the road, which is what I’m planning on doing and hopefully I can get a job down there after I graduate college.”

In the meantime, Jeremiah is busy getting ready to graduate from high school, encouraging his sister to participate in an ELO program, and making plans for a trip this summer with the new friends he made in his group ELO. Corrie, the ELO Coordinator, has big plans too. She’s brought ELO opportunities to five high schools in Washington County so far, and explained that her goal is to, “expand with one other high school, support the sustainability of this program, and continue to be a resource for other schools interested in establishing ELOs.”

Community of Support for Coordinators

CBO coordinator supports

CBO program coordinators whose organizations were, for the most part, embarking on career exploration programming for the first time, said that their quarterly grantee cohort meetings with the Maine Children’s Cabinet (MCC) offered a community of support as did direct assistance from the MCC director and the MCE Statewide Program Coordinator at Maine’s Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD). CBO coordinators also detailed how they found the MCC grant program’s flexibility to be helpful, in terms of approaches the organization could take and having an eligibility structure that allowed more young people to access the program. As one CBO coordinator described,

“I think the creativity that is allowed with this funding has been just incredible, and a refreshing change for a lot of nonprofits. You usually have a lot of strings attached. You know, we have other kids that are trying to get enrolled into [other workforce programs], and there’s so many things that they have to go through to get enrolled that it’s preventing them from getting enrolled. So, for us, not having those requirements has been really in incredible.”

Two of the CBO program sites that are Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) providers, said that collaborating with WIOA strengthened their program by bolstering employer connections and co-enrolling participants to expand access to services, supports, and additional resources like paying for driver’s education or job training opportunities. One CBO site now has a full-time WIOA workforce solutions developer embedded in their program.

ELO coordinator supports

ELO coordinators overwhelmingly described that members of their immediate school community were their key supports. They said school administrators, teachers, guidance counselors, and staff helped by promoting the program, referring students, and making connections with employers. Some ELO coordinators also specifically mentioned how administrators allowing creativity in program expansion approaches, including allowing students to do ELO work during school time or go on field trips and college visits, as particularly helpful. ELO coordinators also named Jobs for Maine Graduates (JMG), the Maine DOE, the Maine C3 Group, community partnerships, and regional collaborations across economic, workforce, and youth development efforts, as a community of support that helped as they expanded or developed new ELO programs.

JMG support for ELO expansion

As previously detailed, JMG Coaches offered 93 trainings and engaged in 1,421 coaching interactions with ELO coordinators and/or school administrators. In focus groups, ELO coordinators described how this regular and ongoing engagement helped them in a variety of ways. Several ELO coordinators said that JMG trainings, regional conferences, and programming resources were especially useful for getting a new ELO program off the ground. As one coordinator described, *“They’ve been super helpful with materials and if you’re coming in new, and you have no idea what ELO is, they’re really good at kind of like giving you a little boot camp.”* Some ELO coordinators described instances where collaboration with JMG staff, also based in their schools, buoyed their recruitment efforts. As one ELO coordinator described, *“My relationship with her [JMG College and Career Specialist at the school] has enabled us to reach more kids than I could ever have reached individually.”*

For ELO programs that experienced administrative hurdles to offering paid work experiences, coordinators highlighted the JMG MCE Badge (MCEB), which includes a \$500 stipend for students upon completion, as a helpful alternate compensation option. Although this may have impacted a relatively small share of ELO



participants from DOE-funded sites (just 12.8% of MCE survey respondents reported earning a MCEB), this suggests that the MCEB and this approach was a helpful avenue for addressing challenges with administering pay. Additionally, program reports from DOE-funded ELO expansion sites and from JMG indicated that ELO experiences utilizing JMG’s LMS ELO portal awarded core credits at higher rates. ELO coordinators identified during focus groups how awarding core credits through ELOs was a challenge. Therefore, this data may indicate that ELO coordinators are utilizing, and could more regularly utilize, the LMS system for awarding core credits since the LMS offers courses that align with Maine Learning Standards.

Helpful Program Components and Supports for Employers

Initial and ongoing support from a coordinator

Almost all employers that completed a survey described CBO and ELO coordinators as instrumental to their successful recruitment and engagement in the MCE program. MCE-engaged employers detailed how CBO and ELO coordinators provided needed, ongoing support to both youth and employers in areas like matching youth to employers, orienting participants to the program goals, and regularly checking in. For example, one employer shared that a coordinator was, “essential to providing guidelines, expectations, and goals,” while another wrote, “Having a coordinator made me a much more confident mentor. I knew I always had support and any questions I had would be promptly answered.” This feedback aligns with a 2021 study of ELO programs in Maine High Schools,¹⁸ which identified how a dedicated coordinator role is essential to ELO program success because of the distinct skillset needed for effective implementation: matching student skills and interests with ELO opportunities, advising students on career pathways, and recruiting employers.

The importance of the coordinator role was discussed by ELO coordinators in the context of the challenges currently facing the state’s economy and its workforce, like businesses being short-staffed, and how these external forces informed recruitment approach with employers. Specifically, ELO coordinators shared how they effectively attracted employers to the program who were hesitant or short on capacity by making clear, upfront, the high level of support they would offer throughout these experiences. CBO coordinators also emphasized recruitment strategies focused on building long-term relationships, engaging employers in the organization’s mission, and playing a strong intermediary role to ensure a positive experience for employers and youth participants. One coordinator described their approach as, “ensuring that they know that if they enter into

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By having a coordinator help facilitate, it made the intern more easily integrated into our existing workflow. The coordinator went over what to expect as an employer, things to make sure we monitor (attendance, punctuality, willingness to learn, productivity etc).

EMPLOYER

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Having a dedicated person of contact at the sending institution was instrumental for us — we have a lot of paperwork on our side that we have to go through for these experiences, and having a central person of contact was huge.

EMPLOYER



a relationship with us through working with one of our youths, that we can provide an awful lot of that hand-over-hand support, as opposed to them hiring somebody off the street who may also need a fair amount of support but doesn't have the partnership resources that we might have to support that connection."

Meeting employers "where they are at"

ELO and CBO coordinators also described how they recruited and supported employers through offering tiered levels of engagement, in a sense, meeting employers where they were at. For example, one ELO coordinator described, "One of the things that was helpful in our program is offering just different levels of a participation for local businesses, and that has allowed them to say, well, I can't take an intern, but I'm definitely willing to sit down with a student for an hour." ELO coordinators also said that having the school provide transportation for students to their work experience also put employers at ease and improved their desire to participate. For a handful of employers, program-supplied transportation was the critical piece that enabled them to say yes to participating.

Program-supplied youth compensation

In the CBO focus group, coordinators detailed that covering compensation and liability for the work experience was also a key incentive and support for employers. One CBO coordinator described, "It really is a positive impact for employers ... that they can enter into this without a long-term commitment, or really, any financial or liability investment upfront. To be able to try something out with the young person." Another said, "It's been kind of hit or miss. I've contacted many, many employers, and a lot of them aren't interested until I mentioned that we have the funds to cover the youth wages and workers comp." The employer survey reflected this same dynamic. In fact, 68.4% of the employers that completed a survey reported they would not be able to participate in the program if they needed to compensate the participants. This indicates that MCE program providing participant compensation is not just an incentive to employers but is critical to their ability to participate.

Implementation Challenges: Opportunities to Improve, Expand, and Sustain Successes

The year one evaluation identified internal programming challenges and external implementation challenges related to broader issues and dynamics facing the state's economy and its workforce. Some of these macro issues are unique to Maine, like the nature of transportation in a rural state which has historically underfunded its transportation systems.¹⁹ Other challenges reflect national trends in the wake of the pandemic, like a tight labor market and a rise in mental health challenges among youth.

However, the MCE program is uniquely positioned to address or overcome many of these challenges for Maine's next generation of workers and their future employers in the state. To do so successfully requires addressing internal challenges related to program administration, coordination across varied efforts, and program design regarding the goal of expanding access equitably. This section summarizes these opportunities to improve, expand, and sustain the encouraging outcomes emerging from the program so far.

Transportation

Coordinators, youth participants, and MCE-engaged employers each identified transportation as a major program implementation challenge. ELO coordinators overwhelmingly pinpointed transportation as their number one challenge, namely bus driver shortages. This limited the extent to which programs could utilize school-based transportation to get students to their work experience sites. As a result, regional transportation challenges like inadequate public transportation and individual transportation challenges which are frequently tied to socio-economic status (e.g., not having access to a car, driver's license, or rides from parents due to cost of gas), became a barrier to program access and/or limited the quality of ELO experiences. For example, one ELO coordinator described the way transportation challenges impacted their program:

“That’s been our biggest hurdle this year. We talked a lot about how this is going to provide equity for our students, and then I’m noticing it’s really the kids who have their own transportation that are able to do more ... Some parents are available to drive kids, and some are not. I feel kids have had very different experiences this year, unfortunately, because I can’t get them somewhere. And that has been a huge frustration to me because there’s money available, there’s just no humans to drive. I almost was like; Can I just get my bus drivers’ license?”

Both CBO and ELO coordinators said that although some had available funds in the MCE grant to use for transportation, they were not able to resolve transportation barriers like the limited availability of school vans and bus drivers, participants from households with no personal transportation, or rural areas with no public transportation and long distances to available work sites. For example, a CBO coordinator shared, *“I have kids that their parents don’t even have cars, but they want to work, and I don’t know how to help them get to and from a job ... We can give you some gas cards, but that’s not the issue when parents either are working and can’t get them there, or the whole family doesn’t have a vehicle.”* Programs in Southern Maine said that even urban communities were not immune to these transportation challenges.

When participants were responsible for their own transportation, the result was often uneven access to the MCE program itself, or a limitation on the variety and quality of the career exploration experiences because young people simply did not have even access to transportation. As explained by one ELO coordinator, this means *“that kids have had very different experiences... yes, you can do virtual things, but there’s nothing like putting a student in a situation so they can actually see what goes on. Yes, you could sit for 20 min to an hour and have a Zoom interview, but it’s just not the same.”*

In some instances, transportation challenges also had a negative impact on employers. Employers detailed youth being late or missing work due to transportation and described how a lack of reliable transportation put limitations on which aspects of their work position they could engage in. This, ultimately, may have meant a less

successful overall experience for a youth. For instance, one employer described how a lack of *“independent transportation”* meant the youth did not get to engage in *“the smaller tasks scattered across a number of properties,”* which limited their overall exposure and experience with that line of work.

Employer recruitment and student placement

Another challenge that CBO and ELO coordinators identified was recruiting employers for work experiences. Most prominently, a tight labor market means many employers are short-staffed, stressed, have limited resources and, therefore, lack the bandwidth to join the program and support inexperienced workers and young workers. Survey responses for employers reflected how having a small and/or overworked staff meant there was not always enough capacity for *“continual supervision and guidance for a young person.”* This meant that even some engaged employers thought their limited bandwidth impeded their ability to offer the ideal experience they sought for program participants.

Coordinators also spoke about the difficulty of finding career exploration work placements for *“hard to place”* industries in which young people are interested. These include automotive and other trade industries (previously acquired skills needed), social work and medical fields (liability and confidentiality issues), IT/technology (not available in some areas), and the legal field. ELO and CBO coordinators as well as surveyed employers spoke to work experience limitations because jobs or employers require a drivers’ license or can only hire workers who are at least 18 years-of-age. Others mentioned placement challenges like matching the momentum of employers and program participants (one is ready and the other is not), and participants changing their minds or losing interest part way through a placement. However, one bright spot found within this challenge was for an ELO program based out of a CTE program, where the coordinator successfully leveraged trade industry relationships to find placements for students who had not been accepted into vocational school previously.

Administering compensation

ELO and CBO programs both encountered challenges with compensating participants for work experiences, but the key challenges were model specific. A couple CBO programs struggled to find the best pay administration method and spoke about reimbursing the employer for participant pay, instead of putting MCE participants on their own organization’s payroll out of concern or lack of information about the potential tax and liability implications. Meanwhile, ELO coordinators described a range of challenges that differed across schools and districts. Some cited small district offices with limited administrative capacity to process payment, while others encountered challenges with understanding the impact of taxes on students. Although providing paid work experience was a cornerstone and priority of the MCE program design, a handful of ELOs were hesitant or unmotivated to work through pay administration challenges because of being unable to guarantee compensation as a component of their program beyond the MCE grant funding period. One ELO coordinator explained, “We have not paid any students... because payment will never be sustainable without the grant and our admins have been hesitant,” while another shared, “The biggest challenge is that [pay] doesn’t feel sustainable. When it disappears, it will leave a void that may sour students’ attitude.”

Finally, some ELO coordinators expressed frustration that there was miscommunication and little initial support around figuring out how to administer pay, although they also identified subsequent solutions which helped address the challenges. Specifically, ELO coordinators described the Manpower pay option coordinated by the MCE Statewide Program Coordinator at DECD as a solution to administering pay. Additionally, others described reimbursing participants for mileage or program supplies as an alternative to compensation, or connecting students with the JMG MCE Badge which offers a \$500 stipend award for completion. At the time of the focus group in the spring of 2023, a few ELO coordinators said that their programs never found a way to offer compensation to program participants and that they could not understand why some programs could and some could not. This underscores the fact that these decisions are made at the local level and are therefore strongly impacted by local school culture, priorities, and administrative capacity and resources.

Unintended consequences of compensation for some low-income participants

Three of the five CBO program coordinators described instances in which the compensation had a negative impact on program participants because the temporary increase in income reduced public benefits for the individual or their household. In fact, all the examples cited by CBO coordinators involved compensation having a negative impact on housing program

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I think that our biggest feedback, as far as struggles that we've had, is ... there was a lot of miscommunications between us, our administration, and the DOE, and how these things had to be done ... it feels like there is not really clear, concise instructions for how to go about some of the bureaucratic stuff.

ELO COORDINATOR

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[Pay] has been a challenge policy-wise and systemically, because we had numerous situations where the family is living in affordable housing, and their rent has gone up because we help the kid get a job.

CBO COORDINATOR

benefits, specifically. CBO coordinators also said that this reality was a significant fear for parents and detailed how, *“We’ve had parents who have essentially blocked their kids from getting work out of fear of losing housing, not being able to afford housing, or not being able to make up the gap of what they’re making.”* One CBO coordinator did say their program found that writing a letter to the public assistance agency that explained the nature of the temporary paid career exploration experience solved this problem for them. Still, the overall collective experience demonstrated that, while receiving pay for work was designed as a benefit of the MCE program, in practice it caused challenges for some lower income youth and acted as barrier for their program participation.

Timing and scheduling

ELO-engaged youth most frequently cited the challenge of scheduling and time constraints, namely, balancing work and school, difficulty scheduling their work experience time around their school schedules and having busy schedules overall. These issues were particularly acute for youth in twelfth grade. One program participant shared that it was harder to manage their work schedule if a shift was not during school hours, while a twelfth grader wrote, *“Senior year is rough. It’s essentially a second capstone and a job on top of everything so I think [the program] should be more for juniors.”* A handful of employers wrote about scheduling issues related to the school calendar, such as holidays, early release days, or teacher workshop days and how these thwarted the schedule they had previously worked out with the youth participant. A couple of employers mentioned scheduling inconsistencies that were related to the youth consistently showing up on time.

Job readiness training and social-emotional support

An implementation challenge identified specifically by ELO coordinators was that many students needed more job readiness training, social skill development, and support before being ready for a work experience. As one ELO coordinator put it, *“The challenge that I ran into is that my students, most of them, are not ready for full internships at all. Many of them have major, major communication problems ... they forget to show up, stop answering their phone ... it impacted my ability to provide meaningful experiences for students.”* Other ELO coordinators detailed that working with highly disadvantaged youth made it challenging to *“put them into a position of responsibility in the community”* without first meeting their job readiness and social-emotional needs. Further, doing so could lead to a bad experience that could damage relationships with employers. For instance, an ELO coordinator shared, *“If we send them a student who doesn’t show up and does a really bad job, and then we call them the next year and ask them if they’ll take another student, they might say no.”*

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We work with a population that are highly disadvantaged and often deal with trauma/homelessness etc. They have not had basic skills developed around executive functioning and therefore need a lot more help with ‘adulting’ before being put into a position of responsibility in the community.

ELO COORDINATOR

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We find that a lot of times, we get high-barrier students who are not ready to be going out to the community, and it's threatening to those [employer] partnerships, because if we send them a student who doesn't show up and does a really bad job, and then we call them the next year and ask them if they'll take another student, they might say no. So, we're still trying to figure out how we can still serve those students because we want to help them.

ELO COORDINATOR

While employers did not specifically speak to the need for social-emotional supports, many wished that youth received a class on “basic employee skills” such as customer service, communication, and how to engage the public. In that vein, a few employers also wished for a “how to support youth workers” training prior to the work experience.

Many CBO and ELO coordinators and MCE-engaged employers identified the broader challenges facing youth in Maine as external factors impacting the MCE program. Most frequently, coordinators brought up mental health challenges among youth, like anxiety and depression. One CBO coordinator explained,

“We see [it] as an epidemic of mental health challenges amongst youth, and especially for our population, which is an out-of-school population, really, those struggles are hard. It's probably a reason, at least in part, why they're no longer in school, and they certainly do translate to success in our program as well as in employment and career settings.”

Likewise, one employer wrote, “I feel the most important things to keep in mind is the issues many youth face that our generations did not. Things like anxiety and attention should be kept in mind. This program helps a great deal for them but these issues I have noticed have been reoccurring.” Other challenging trends mentioned by CBO and ELO coordinators included the negative impact of the pandemic on school culture, academics, and youth engagement, in addition to home stressors and difficult family dynamics.

ELO program knowledge and school integration

Although ELO coordinators described their school community as one of their biggest sources of support, they also described how teachers and school administrators lack knowledge or understanding of ELOs and their relationship to academics and school culture. For example, some described this as “communicating what ELO is and is not,” or in another instance, needing to “develop the right type of marketing tools to support a conversation ... to better introduce how ELO internships fit into the bigger academic picture.” Communicating the purpose and definition of ELOs and distinguishing between ELOs, the JMG MCE Badge, and other related opportunities like apprenticeships and work-based learning also came up when promoting the program to multiple audiences, including students, employers, and school staff. Relatedly, several ELO students said that they experienced school staff not comprehending the ELO program, including, “school counselors not understanding how the ELO process works in regard to early college.”

Several coordinators also described encountering opposition from teachers who worried that ELOs would hinder the role of teachers and traditional classroom education. As a result, new programs, in general, and developing ELOs for core credit, in particular, were met with some resistance. One ELO coordinator described this as an equity issue, saying that it had been “a barrier for students who don't have a lot of room in their schedule ... who need something for graduation requirements.”

Program reports from DOE grantees reflect the core credit challenge, with aggregated year one reports showing that core credits made up just 4.0% of all credits awarded for ELO experiences. However, of the ELO credit-bearing experiences that occurred via the JMG LMS, 13.0% were awarded core credits. While this is still low overall, it suggests that the JMG's Learning Management System (LMS) bolsters the ability of ELOs to meet core credit requirements. JMG staff may also have more success advocating for core credits for ELOs with school staff/administrators than the individual ELO coordinators, as suggested in the ELO coordinator focus group.

Several coordinators also reported instances where school administrators and teachers viewed ELOs as a reward or enrichment activity which prevented students with lower academic performance from participating. As explained by one ELO coordinator, *"My teachers have actually been supportive of the program in a lot of different ways, but the kids who would be really benefit from going out on ELOs and having it incorporate into their classroom setting, didn't get really the opportunity to do that as much. It was more of an enrichment thing for kids who are already passing all of their classes. That part was really challenging for me."* This school-specific administrative practice, therefore, limited access and added barriers for students who struggle in school and may have benefitted from ELO programming.

Overall, ELO coordinators desired more support and resources to address challenges related to further integrating ELOs into schools. As one coordinator put it, *"I think more education to teachers on what ELOs would be really helpful, and how to incorporate them more within their curriculum and what they're teaching and how they're teaching because I would like to work more with our teachers."*

Coordination and role clarity

Several entities were involved in promoting and coordinating ELO programs and the Maine Career Exploration Badge, and these offerings and efforts often overlapped in regions and in school districts. In some cases, ELO coordinators said that a lack of coordination across these varied efforts caused confusion for school staff, employers, and students. As one ELO coordinator put it, *"It felt like two entities trying to do the same thing. And it gets really confusing when there's different expectations for the school employee versus a JMG employee, and having those kind of be more united would have been a little bit easier to navigate."* Others described duplicated efforts, lack of communication, and lack of role clarity or clear expectations between JMG staff and DOE-funded ELO program staff working in the same schools and districts. Some coordinators said that this challenge impeded efforts to build relationships with employers and school staff as they were working to establish a new ELO program. As one ELO coordinator explained, *"I think everybody had good intentions, but it was just hard for me to really kind of form those strong partnerships at the beginning."* Importantly, ELO coordinators also cited instances when working collaboratively with JMG staff bolstered their own efforts and program successes. One coordinator added, *"I'd like to see that be more of a collaborative relationship across the board, not just at the feet-on-the-ground level."*



Sustaining expanded career exploration access

Despite sustainability planning being a required component of the DOE grant, ELO coordinators raised the difficulty of building a sustainable program knowing that the MCE funding was temporary. Moreover, some ELO coordinators hesitated to utilize the supports offered by JMG because they believed that building a sustainable program meant they had to do it on their own. As one coordinator put it, we “want to be successful in our own right.” Or, as noted above, some did not implement paid ELO experiences because they did not want to establish a component of the program that they could not maintain without grant funding in the future. One ELO coordinator summarized the groups’ collective sentiment in this area when they shared, “I do not want to set a precedent with the program that we can’t sustain after the grant is over because I’m afraid that that would drive students away.” Sustainability challenges appeared to be especially pronounced for those establishing new programs and in rural areas. As one coordinator described, *“That sustainability piece is huge, especially in places like rural Washington and Aroostook County, where this grant was the first time ELOs were even brought to the community, and we only have this grant for two years. So, I’m not able to build any sustainability because ... it’s really hard to get into new schools when I’m only here for one more year.”* Notably, CBO coordinators did not raise concerns about the sustainability of their programs beyond the Children’s Cabinet pilot project grant funding period. This may be because CBOs are more accustomed to operating with temporary grant funding and may also have more control over implementation and post-grant period decisions than individual coordinators who work within school districts.

Ultimately, for ELO coordinators their primary concern was losing the gains of ELO expansion and the positive impacts they have observed for their students and communities. For example, one ELO coordinator stated, *“I’m so worried. It’s not just about keeping me here. I’m employable. I can go wherever. But our kids need this. Not just our kids here, but kids in the state, kids all over really, really need to learn the soft skills, the employability, how to work with an employer.”* Employers shared similar sentiments. For instance, a respondent of the employer survey stated, *“I really hope this program continues. It’s crucial to not only aid local businesses but give youth of the community a place to start.”*

Discussion

The Maine DOE and the Children's Cabinet (through DECD) awarded grant funding with the following goals: 1) expand the availability of career exploration programming, 2) increase access for disadvantaged, disconnected, or disengaged youth, and 3) develop supportive infrastructure and encourage sustainability.

The program totals for the first-year show that the MCE program reached its primary goal of expanding career exploration opportunities throughout Maine. In year one, the five community-based organization grantees, funded through the Children's Cabinet pilot project, established relationships with dozens of employers, and reported that 70 youth completed a paid work experience and 212 completed the job-readiness component of the program. The 19 new ELO programs

and seven expanded ELO programs, funded by the Maine DOE, reported that 784 students completed paid ELO experiences, students earned 974.25 credits, and programs established 1,115 new community and business partnerships.

Importantly, and in alignment with goal two, ELO programs reached many rural communities that did not previously have access to such experiences, through schools and intermediary organizations—like Healthy Acadia, UMaine Presque Isle, and the Waldo County Tech Center—which provided the coordination needed to bring ELOs to rural Maine students. Likewise, CBO programs reached target populations—including youth with low income, youth connected to the juvenile justice and/or foster care systems, youth experiencing homelessness, and youth of color and/or from indigenous communities—through programming models that successfully offered job-readiness alongside key wraparound services.

This initial program evaluation has highlighted critical infrastructure supports and potential pivot points for promoting the sustainability of MCE programming and contributing to Maine's workforce development goals. After offering a brief recap of participant outcomes from the program's initial year, this section focuses on primary considerations that MCE program staff, policy makers, and state and local school administrators can use to inform future programming and program sustainability.



Participant Outcomes

This program evaluation found that MCE-engaged youth and employers had positive and meaningful experiences. Overall, youth and employers gave high ratings and provided positive feedback on a variety of program experience components. Their feedback, coupled with the observations of the CBO and ELO coordinators, provide strong evidence that the **Maine Career Exploration program supports:**

- ▶ Improved academic experience
- ▶ Growth in targeted career-readiness skills, knowledge, abilities
- ▶ Improved social-emotional skills
- ▶ Increased awareness of career opportunities and pathways
- ▶ Greater career clarity
- ▶ Building hope for participants, families, and communities
- ▶ Increased employment, including job offers

The evaluation findings also point to three **program components that are essential to achieve these positive outcomes** for youth participants:

- ▶ Intensive, and consistent support from program staff helped youth sustain motivation, supported youth to overcome challenges that might otherwise prevent or disrupt career exploration, and played a critical intermediary role between youth and employers to ensure a positive experience for both parties.
- ▶ Hands-on learning and meaningful or interesting work experiences, which youth described as empowering and motivating, coupled with guided reflection activities helped participants learn more from the experience.
- ▶ Group ELO and CBO cohort experiences were particularly helpful approaches for youth who needed more support or were less prepared for a work experience.

Additionally, the evidence suggests that the MCE program contributes to a workforce development pipeline, effectively supporting a key goal of the Maine Jobs & Recovery Plan and Maine's 10-year Economic Development Plan. Specifically, the MCE program is connecting youth and Maine employers in ways that result in jobs in the short-term for many participants and will pay off for both parties in the longer term. Employers not only appreciated the opportunity to build relationships with the next generation of workers, but many thought the experience yielded a moderate or major benefit of attracting talent to Maine's industries and fields.



Considerations for Ongoing and Future Programming

Against the backdrop of the successes and challenges experienced in the first year, we offer the following considerations as MCE navigates the second year of program implementation. These considerations are organized into two broad categories: program elements to expand and sustain career exploration and program elements to promote equity.

Programming elements to expand and sustain career exploration throughout Maine:

The field needs additional communication tools for effective ELO promotion.

ELO coordinators faced challenges promoting ELO programs to students and employers and within schools, and seek support with communicating the definition of ELOs, distinguishing the core elements, and how ELOs can integrate with and bolster their school's broader academic goals and pathways. These could include resources (such as fact sheets, talking points, or sample communication scripts) or official communications strategies (such as newsletter highlights, web postings, or press coverage). Coordinators also specifically described a desire to see a broader statewide effort around outreach and education to teachers about ELOs. Efforts are currently underway at the Maine DOE to develop tools to support ELO outreach and communication.

JMG provides vital support for ELO coordinators and program expansion.

JMG played a vital role in ELO expansion by supporting ELO coordinators and by offering their own ELO programming, including the MCE Badge. JMG also built the capacity of the ELO network and developed infrastructure to support statewide expansion. ELOs should continue leveraging JMG's Learning Management System, regional trainings, and supporting resources. In addition, ELOs should be encouraged to offer the MCE Badge when paid work experiences prove too challenging to administer locally and to further utilize the LMS to overcome challenges around developing core credit aligned ELOs.

Increased coordination and role clarity between ELOs and JMG could mitigate overlapping efforts.

Leveraging JMG's support of ELO expansion and outreach efforts has been most successful when collaboration and coordination is present. When that is not the case, there is a risk of these overlapping outreach efforts resulting in success for one party at the detriment of the other. Emerging findings

suggest that this is a higher risk in rural communities and in larger schools that have both ELO and JMG staff, in which case increased role clarity would help. Collaboration on the development of ELO messaging and communication tools across the DOE and JMG may also help mitigate overlapping outreach efforts.

Programs need increased support for administering pay, particularly for CBOs.

Programs encountered barriers administering pay to MCE-engaged youth. For ELOs, this was especially challenging in rural districts with limited administrative bandwidth and school administrations that were hesitant about paying students. Having effective pay administration that is available across all program types is particularly important since evaluation findings suggest that pay often results in a job offer from the employer. While Manpower was a helpful solution for many ELO programs, CBO programs could not utilize this option and continue to need further guidance and support in this area.

Flexible and responsive programming for vulnerable youth yields positive impacts.

The Children's Cabinet pilot project grant (administered by DECD) is flexible, and its guidelines are less stringent than other workforce training programs for disadvantaged and disconnected youth. These two aspects of the funding have allowed the CBOs to be creative in their program design and implementation and to effectively engage more participants. Some notable successes for the field from the first year of the pilot include collaborating with the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), support service funds to connect participants to need supports, and cohort approaches that create supportive social-emotional and career-readiness learning environments. Despite having different program models and target populations, the youth survey results across CBO and ELO-engaged participants were not significantly different. This evidence suggests that investing in meaningful career exploration opportunities through community-based organizations is an effective model for expanding opportunities for disadvantaged youth.

Relationship-building, flexibility, and support are key to sustaining and expanding employer engagement.

Employers play a critical role in MCE expansion and its ongoing success. However, many have limited bandwidth in a tight labor market, and do not have the ability to pay students for their work. Offering tiered levels of engagement (for example, a one-day job shadows up to a multi-week work experience) and intensive support from coordinators has helped address these challenges. Similarly, CBO coordinators found success with recruitment strategies that focused on building long-term relationships through engaging employers in the CBO's mission and playing a strong intermediary role to ensure a positive program experience. However, employers indicated that more effort upfront to structure, plan, and be prepared for hosting the MCE work experience would be helpful. This underscores the crucial role of program coordinators in the success of the work experience and suggests that ensuring coordinators have the time and resources to foster and support the employer experience will be critical in the future success of MCE programming.

ELO sustainability would benefit from tools that support local conversations about program needs.

Maine DOE required ELO expansion grant applicants to develop a plan for how they would sustain their program beyond the grant period. ELO coordinators overwhelmingly shared appreciation for the funding and their understanding that it was intended to be temporary. Yet, in some cases, coordinators were hesitant to implement key aspects of the program or to take advantage of support from JMG. Additionally, ELO coordinators of new rural programs expressed concern around how to sustain the gains they have made in their districts by bringing hands-on, community-based learning opportunities to schools that otherwise do not have elective courses. Program coordinators indicated that important funding and policy decisions that impact the future of local ELO programs beyond the grant period would take place at the local school administration level. Therefore, it will be important to develop tools to support conversations about the role and impact of ELOs and to encourage sustainability planning at the local level. Resources could include

talking points, effective communication strategies, slide decks presenting evidence and best practices, or a compilation of successful local funding strategies undertaken by other communities in Maine.

Program elements to influence equitable access to career exploration:

Pay is an incentive and an equalizer to program participation, especially for disadvantaged and disconnected young people.

One of the MCE program's primary tools for increasing equitable access to meaningful work experiences is pay. This is based on the underlying premise that compensation acts as an equalizer for those who cannot afford to dedicate unpaid time to career exploration.²⁰ The findings from year one are consistent with the existing research and indicate that pay is an effective tool for engaging young people in Maine who are disadvantaged, disconnected, and/or have low-income. As an ELO coordinator put it, "it brings students who otherwise wouldn't be able to participate into the program." Furthermore, the findings suggest pay is a valuable tool for incentivizing youth in Maine to choose an ELO experience over the competitive pay offered by some local job opportunities, which may result in longer-term benefits to their career.

Pay can be a risk or barrier for some low-income youth.

The findings also revealed instances where compensation for career exploration work experiences caused a temporary increase in household income which reduced public benefits for the individual or their household.^{vii} In some instances, fear of this negative impact alone prevented youth from participating in the program. This issue surfaced particularly for CBO programs and threatens the intention of offering pay as an equalizer posing a critical issue worth further consideration by the MCE program.

Transportation challenges exacerbate uneven program access.

Transportation significantly impacted equitable program access in the first year and aligns with a 2021 study of Maine ELO programs which stated, "Simply put, access to transportation is not equitably distributed ... Any program looking to expand access to ELOs in Maine should include transportation considerations as a requisite aspect of the program design."²¹ While the MCE program allowed grantees to allocate a portion of their grant funds to transportation supports, those funds alone did not solve most of the transportation challenges, which were both systemic and individual in nature. Despite some promising strategies, like paying for participants to take a driver's education course or have youth complete group experiences, identifying effective strategies to mitigate instances where inadequate transportation results in uneven participation in career exploration programming is a critical area for further inquiry.

ELO programs encounter barriers that particularly impact struggling or disengaged students.

Maine DOE ELO expansion programs face two major barriers when engaging disadvantaged youth which impede their opportunity to participate in career exploration. First, ELO programs are often seen as a reward, or simply insufficient for awarding core credits. This makes it more difficult for disengaged or struggling students to participate in and benefit from the alternative, hands-on experiences. There is an opportunity to further support the integration of ELOs in schools at the statewide level, and the Maine DOE is uniquely positioned support increased alignment between ELOs and core credit requirements and access to ELO programming. Second, students in need of more social-emotional skill development and job-readiness training before being ready for a community-based work experience.

ELO coordinators need more resources to engage and support these students so that the students can access

vii All the examples provided in the focus group related to affordable housing benefits, but it is not clear whether the impacts also extend to other benefits programs or if there is something about housing benefit policy that makes the program more sensitive to short-term changes in income than others.

and benefit from career exploration and meaningful work experiences. Notably, CBO coordinators—whose organizations received funding to connect youth with additional wraparound supports and offer distinct job-readiness components—did not raise this concern and may offer helpful strategies that could apply to ELO program efforts.

Looking Ahead

This interim report summarized the emerging findings from the evaluation of year one of the Maine Career Exploration program implementation at ELO and CBO grantee sites between July 2022 and August 2023. The year two evaluation effort will continue to assess program participants outcomes and implementation successes and challenges which influence those outcomes in order to demonstrate lessons for the field and implications for state and local policymakers. The year two research will also focus on issues identified in the interim findings that demand further exploration. These include:

- ▶ Utilizing pay as a tool for increasing equitable access by exploring best practices, alternative supports, and policy and program design strategies for mitigating the risk of the real and perceived negative impacts for low-income household benefits.
- ▶ Further understanding pay as a critical incentive for employer participation, and potential alternative incentives, and gaining a deeper understanding of what appears to be a positive connection between paid experiences and job offers from employers.
- ▶ Identifying and further exploring promising transportation strategies and effective use of available funding to create solutions for equitable program engagement.
- ▶ Continuing to explore and understand the programmatic elements that support community-based organizations to be an effective model for expanding career exploration access and opportunities to disadvantaged youth while having a measurable positive impact.
- ▶ Explore and collate local experiences of successful sustainability planning from both new and expanding programs.

Endnotes

- 1 2020 Maine Learning Results Life and Career Ready Standards; Biddle, C., & Mette, I. M. (2016). Successful Strategies for Extended Learning Opportunities: A Literature Review of Academic Benefits and Beyond; Robinson, B. B. (2015). Extended Learning Opportunities in New Hampshire: An Exploration of High School Students' Perspectives and Lived Experiences [Plymouth State University]. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1734864256?fromopenview=true&pq-origsite=gscholar&parentSessionId=VogKmlpCWkwHVL9VCelmDZoWa5Yo9StB5%2B7Mcolkdvc%3D>.
- 2 Ross, M., Moore, K. A., Murphy, K., & Bateman, N. (2018). Pathways To High-Quality Jobs For Young Adults.
- 3 See note 1, Biddle & Mette, 2016.
- 4 Xing, X., Huerta, M., & Garza, T. (2019). College and Career Preparation Activities and Their Influence on Post-High School Education and Work Attainment. *Journal of Career and Technical Education*, 34(1), 8. <https://doi.org/10.21061/jcte.v34i1.a1>.
- 5 Maine Department of Education, 2023
- 6 Source: State of Maine Business Case, Youth Career Exploration (2021).
- 7 Maine Career Exploration Grant Funding Request for Application (RFA 202203044)
- 8 Adapted from Connecting Every Learner: A Framework for States to Increase Access to and Success in Work-Based Learning, 2021 and Bellwether Education Partners, 2021.
- 9 See note 7.
- 10 Charland, J. (2014). Teaching and Learning 21st Century Skills in Maine.
- 11 Stauffer, Bri. "What are 21st Century Skills." iCEV. January 10, 2022. <https://www.aeseducation.com/blog/what-are-21st-century-skills>
- 12 Maine Career Exploration Program. Maine Jobs and Recovery Plan. <https://www.maine.gov/jobsplan/program/maine-career-exploration-program>
- 13 See note 1, Biddle & Mette, 2016.

- 14 Rosenbaum, J. E., DeLuca, S., Miller, S. R., & Roy, K. (1999). Pathways into Work: Short- and Long-Term Effects of Personal and Institutional Ties. *Sociology of Education*, 72(3), 179. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2673228>.
- 15 See note 1, Robinson, B. B. (2015).
- 16 See note 2, Ross et al., 2018.
- 17 See note 1, Robinson, B. B. (2015).
- 18 Saenz, Lauren; Johnson, Amy; and Pines, Matt, "Extended learning Opportunity (ELO) Programs in Maine High Schools" (2021). *School Improvement*. 26. https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/cepare_improvement/26
- 19 Maine's 10-Year Economic Development Strategy (2019): https://www.maine.gov/decd/sites/maine.gov.decd/files/inline-files/DECD_120919_sm.pdf Maine spends 86 cents per person annually for public transportation. That is 37th among all states and is below every other state in New England.
- 20 See note 2, Ross et al., 2018 and note 3, Biddle & Mette, 2016
- 21 See note 18, Saenz et al., 2021.

