MAINE CAREER EXPLORATION

Final Evaluation Report

MEANINGFUL WORK EXPERIENCES, ASPIRATIONAL FUTURES

DATA INNOVATION PROJECT

Catherine Cutler Institute

University of Southern Maine

Prepared for the State of Maine

DATA INNOVATION PROJECT

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Research Disclosure Statement

The Data Innovation Project recognizes that the study of the social realm can never be truly neutral. As applied researchers our social positions inevitably 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, employed, White professionals. 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, 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 was a $25 million, two-year pilot initiative launched in 2022 by Governor Janet Mills as part of her Maine Jobs & Recovery Plan. The initiative intended to connect young people to Maine's economy through age-appropriate career experiences that aligned with their interests.

The primary goals of this initiative were 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 initial federal funding for the initiative.

The program was managed by the Maine Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD), which provided administrative, statewide oversight of the initiative. **Investment into the program was allocated across three funding streams:**

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 these program areas were distinct, all aligned with emerging research, policies, and practices aimed at preparing youth for life after high school by expanding their career, life, and college readiness skills. Further, the MCE pilot program provided meaningful work experiences, career awarenes,s and job readiness activities – opportunities that national literature identifies as critical for young people's personal and professional development.

FIGURE 1.

MCE exceeded its goal to provide meaningful work experiences to 6,000 young people

☑ 6,066

YEAR 2
GOAL: 6,000

YEAR 1
PROGRESS

2,648
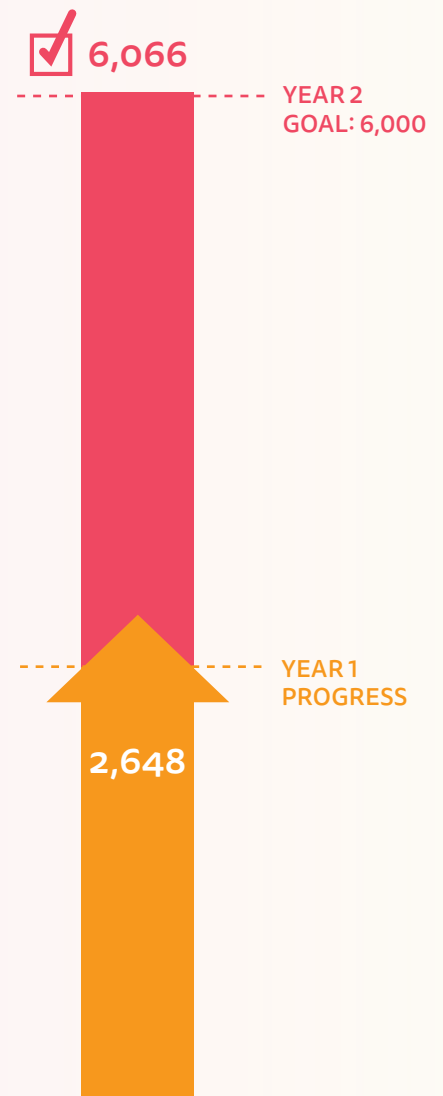
Highlights by the Numbers

Across the two years of implementation, MCE programming was successful in meeting many of its goals, and exceeded its goal to provide paid, meaningful work experiences to 6,000 young people (see Figure 1.). Highlights from each program include:

▶ **Children's Cabinet Community-Based Organization (CBO)**

- ▶ The Children's Cabinet pilot project supported five sites to engage 542 disconnected and underrepresented youth in career exploration and meaningful paid work programming.

- ▶ Overall, 447 youth completed job-readiness programming, and 298 youth completed a paid work experience.

▶ **Maine DOE Extended Learning Opportunity (ELO) Expansion**

- ▶ The Maine DOE project expanded ELO programs to 26 sites across Maine, providing 1,833 total paid work experiences.

- ▶ Of these, 1,350 paid work experiences provided school credit. Overall, students earned 2,098.5 credits through ELO participation.

▶ **Jobs for Maine Graduates**

- ▶ JMG supported ELO expansion, and 3,935 Maine students received Maine Career Exploration Badges for completing the program, an average of 558 ELO portal participants and 1,659 JMG portal participants per quarter.

- ▶ Further, JMG provided 132 trainings and 2,707 coaching interactions to ELO coordinators and school administrators statewide.

Purpose of the Report

The purpose of this report is to document the impact and effectiveness of the MCE program. The Data Innovation Project (DIP) at the University of Southern Maine's Catherine Cutler Institute published an Interim Evaluation Report in March of 2024, which evaluated the preliminary participant outcomes and program implementation successes and challenges. This final report presents data across the two-year program period and expands on the findings, implications, and recommendations.

The program evaluation relied on a mixed methods evaluation design to gather formative and summative data about the MCE program from program-engaged youth, employers, and coordinators. In addition to aggregating routine program reporting, **the evaluation activities and evaluation-engaged participants included:**

▶ **Program Completion Survey:** 322 youth who participated in an ELO (229 youth) or CBO (86 youth) program completed an online survey at the end of their program experience.

▶ **Photovoice:** 16 youth participated in photovoice interviews, a participatory data methodology using photography and storytelling, to create profiles of their work experiences.

▶ **Employer Survey:** 119 employers from 48 different Maine towns and cities completed an online survey.

▶ **Program Coordinator Focus Groups:** 20 ELO coordinators and 6 CBO staff attended at least one of two focus groups across 2023 and 2024.

While JMG programming and its important role was discussed in the interim report, JMG conducted a separate evaluation of its MCE-funded efforts. Therefore, the findings detailed in this report are based on CBO and ELO-engaged youth, program coordinators, and employers that engaged in DIP evaluation activities and findings should be viewed within this context.
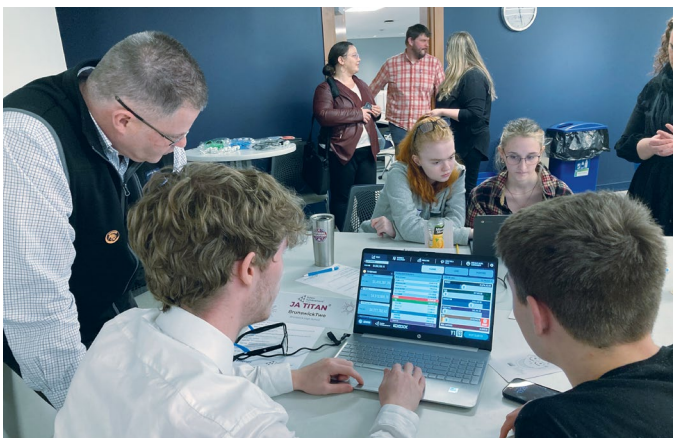
What MCE-Engaged Youth and Employers Gained

Across its two years, the MCE program supported positive short-term outcomes for participants, which translates into potential long-term contributions to Maine's workforce. More specifically, **youth participants gained:**

▶ New academic experiences and pathways, including hands-on and community-based learning opportunities that were otherwise unavailable.

▶ 21st Century job-readiness skills and abilities, such as problem-solving, communication, and teamwork skills.

▶ Social and emotional growth through increased confidence, self-esteem, motivation, and self-efficacy.

▶ New adult connections and support that helped them take concrete steps towards their future goals.

▶ Clarity about future career plans and post-secondary pathways.

▶ Optimism and excitement about their futures.

▶ Job offers and employment.

Employers also gained positive outcomes as a result of engaging with MCE programming, including:

▶ An expanded workforce and pipeline that they helped to develop.

▶ New and expanded connections with schools, community-based organizations, and the next generation of Maine workers.

What Makes the MCE Approach Work Best

While the MCE program was successful for many reasons, certain program elements made it work best. First and foremost, the **funded program coordinator role** was a cornerstone of the program and was critical to its success. This role was embedded in all five essential program aspects which included:

▶ **Structured and ongoing support to participants,** and pathways to meaningful career exploration opportunities that matched youth aspirations.

▶ **A clear orientation to program expectations and responsibilities** through ongoing support for youth and employers from program coordinators.

- The **adaptability of program coordinators** to meet the needs of the communities they served while still adhering to program requirements.

- **The compensation of youth,** especially those from low-income families, which increased equitable access to work experiences and enabled more employers to offer work opportunities.

- **Deep relationships and collaboration** between coordinators, schools, and community partners which facilitated formalized programming and pathways and ensured career exploration opportunities continued.

The Effect of Rurality

Maine's rural geography presents unique challenges and disparities between rural and urban populations, making it essential to build opportunities in rural Maine — a goal of the Maine DOE ELO expansion. Results from the youth exit survey demonstrated:

- **Rural youth had greater engagement in the job search process than urban youth.**

  - Urban youth were more likely to be motivated to participate in the MCE program by hands-on learning, receiving help with graduation or attaining a HiSET, and earning a career certification than rural youth.

  - Rural youth were more likely to have shorter work experiences (0-6 weeks in length) than youth from urban areas (7+ weeks in length).

- While all youth experienced growth in 21st Century skills, **youth from rural areas reported slightly lower positive program impacts compared to their urban counterparts,** particularly in the areas of communication, problem-solving, and teamwork skills. Rural youth also reported slightly less clarity and optimism around their future goals.

- In general, **both urban and rural youth demonstrated strong growth through participation** in the MCE program, and this growth is likely to become more equitable through continued program expansion and adaption, especially in rural areas.

Ongoing Challenges and Considerations

The MCE program demonstrated adaptability which allowed it to meet participants' needs and mitigate implementation challenges at the individual and community levels. Still, some challenges could not be controlled by the program and will continue to influence career exploration initiatives in Maine. These include:

▶ **Geographical and transportation limitations,** impacted by socioeconomic factors and a lack of available local work opportunities of interest in non-urban areas.

▶ **Employer recruitment and field restrictions,** where employers are unable to support work experiences for young or inexperienced workers, or workers who do not have field-specific certifications or meet legal requirements.

▶ **Competitive or higher pay** offered at businesses which provide jobs, but do not promote career exploration goals or targeted skill development that serve Maine youth now and in the future.

Evaluation Takeaways and Looking Forward

The evaluation of the MCE program demonstrated critical youth and employer outcomes, including overwhelmingly positive experiences for both. MCE-engaged youth experienced growth in short- and long-term ways related to skills, abilities, connections, and optimism about the future. Employers recognized the benefit of initiatives like the MCE program on Maine's workforce and gained new and expanded connections with schools and community-based organizations. Program flexibility also helped to mitigated implementation challenges, though there are still areas for improvement, especially related to the needs of rural communities. With many program sites granted extensions until 2026, several important takeaways can help guide them as they continue to offer meaningful experiences to youth and employers. These include:

1. A funded program coordinator is vital to success.

2. Flexible and responsive programs yield positive impacts, especially for vulnerable youth.

3. Relationship-building, flexibility, and ongoing support sustain employer engagement.

4. Compensation promotes equitable access to career exploration.

5. Formalized programming and pathways help sustain and grow career exploration in Maine.

"

It's just been deeply impactful for everyone across the board. And I just want to highlight the narrative of how there's no success in rural Maine, and kids can't stay here, and you need to leave to be successful. For me, the thing I most enjoyed about the ELOs is just helping kids connect to meaning and relevance in these small communities and just helping them expand the ideas of what you can do in your small rural area.

PROGRAM COORDINATOR

Introduction

In 2022, Governor Janet Mills announced the Maine Career Exploration (MCE) program, a $25 million, two-year initiative of her Maine Jobs & Recovery Plan. The core goal of the MCE program was to connect 6,000 Mainers aged 16-24 to future career opportunities by funding paid work experiences with employers across the state. Additional pilot program goals included expanding existing and building new career exploration programming in high schools and communities as well as establishing infrastructure to support the programming beyond the initial federal funding.

The MCE program was built on the understanding that exposing young people to new experiences and pathways leads to improved lifetime earnings, stronger ties to Maine's employers, and, ultimately, an improved labor market. It was designed to reach youth across Maine's cities, towns, and most rural areas (see Figure 2, page 11). In order to achieve this reach, the Maine Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD) conducted program management, administration, and statewide oversight of the initiative.

The primary goals of the Maine Career Exploration pilot initiative were 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.

Primary Areas of MCE Programming

Investment into the program was allocated across three funding streams and primary areas:

Maine Children's Cabinet Career Exploration Pilot Project

A 5-site pilot project funded through grants administered by DECD to support disconnected and under-represented youth, aged 16-24, in career exploration and meaningful paid work programming. Participating organizations were required to be community-based, an education provider, or a workforce development entity. These organizations also had to have been currently providing services to Maine youth connected to the juvenile justice or foster care systems, low-income youth, and youth of color and/or from indigenous communities.

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

A DOE grant program that expanded the ELO programs at 26 sites across Maine for students 16-22 years old. Most sites were publicly funded School Administrative Units (SAUs), with some Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), Career and Technical Education Centers (CTEs), and one public university, acting as ELO intermediaries.

Jobs for Maine Graduates (JMG) Career Exploration Expansion

The largest statewide education nonprofit in Maine, which was provided one-time funding to expand career exploration work at 90 Maine high schools. This funding was used to support increased participation in ELOs, meaningful paid work experience for students, and the attainment of credentials/badges to prepare them for future employment and/or post-secondary degree programs. The funding also supported the development of a new Learning Management System virtual platform, which held student courses that align with Maine Learning Standards, professional development resources, and coaching and training resources for ELO coordinators, school administrators, and JMG Specialists.

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
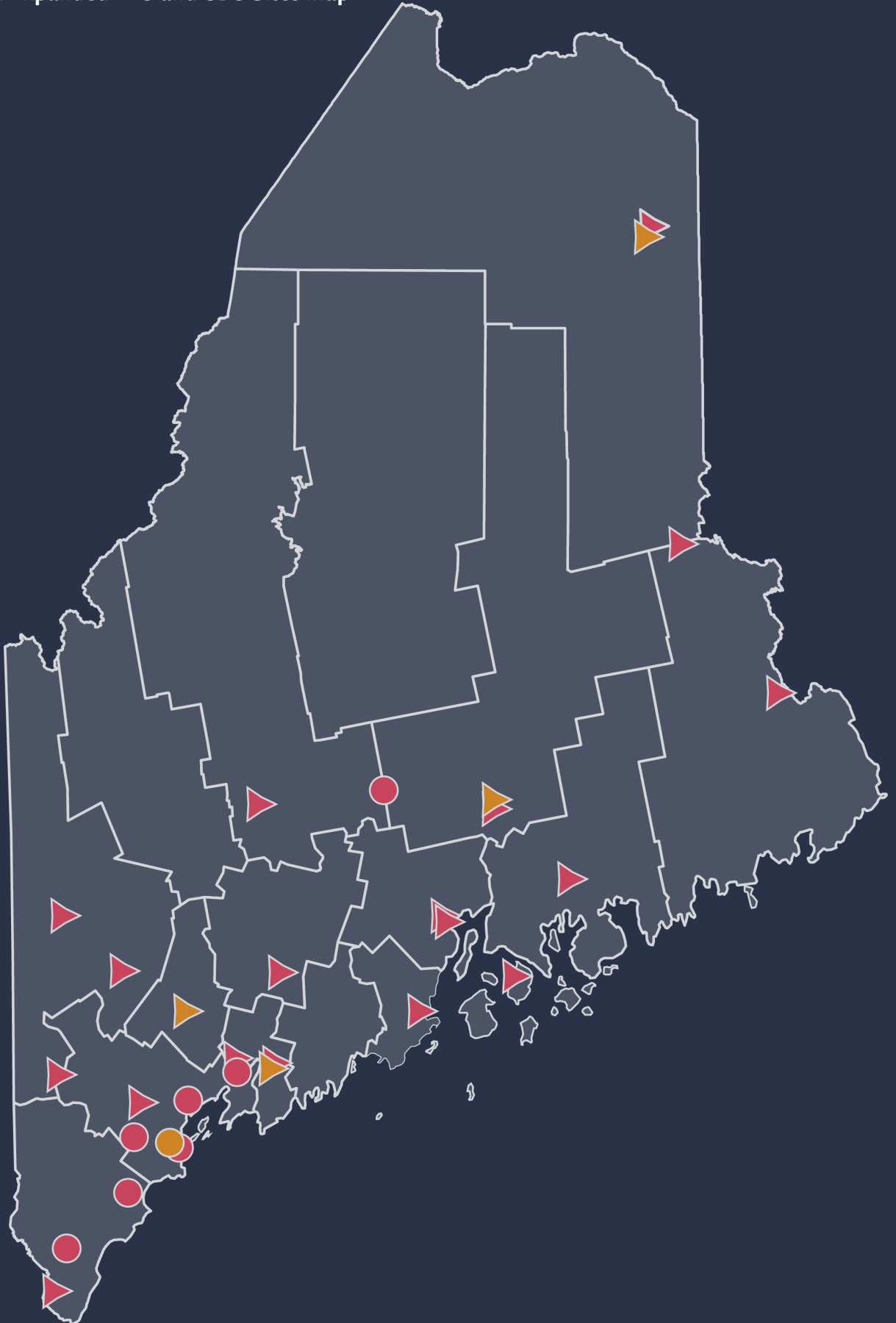
TABLE 2.

Continuum of Maine Career Exploration Program Activities

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

The MCE program areas align with the emerging research, policies, and practices that have expanded the scope of what it means for young people to be prepared for life after high school, where career and life readiness skills are developed alongside college readiness. New education and positive youth development practices and policies, including the updated Maine Learning Results Life and Career Ready Standards (2020),** focus on the development of important career readiness elements for K-12 students: an improved capacity for goal setting; increased social and emotional intelligence; an improved sense of self; and employable skills. These elements help to ensure that students are prepared to explore and aspire to varied post-graduation options and life goals.[1]

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.[2] MCE program activities were specifically designed to fill or decrease opportunity gaps for young people in the areas of work preparedness, career awareness or exploration, and career training. Evidence shows that these activities improve youth career and educational skills, and aspirations in the short term and also have positive implications for long-term outcomes. Building career aspirations, skills and training opportunities has the potential to increase future earnings job quality and satisfaction.[3,4,5] Table 2. demonstrates the range of activities, from learning financial literacy to engaging in an internship or apprenticeship, that the national literature defines as being the most effective in providing meaningful opportunities and experiences, all of which the MCE pilot program supported.

** Maine DOE plans to update the Maine Learning Results Life and Career Ready Standards in 2025.

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 impact and effectiveness of the MCE program. The DIP published an Interim Evaluation Report in March 2024, which described the origin of the funding, areas of MCE programming, a detailed site map of the new and expanded learning opportunities, and a definition of *career exploration*. Additionally, the interim report, which assessed program implementation between July 2022 and August 2023, presented emerging findings that focused on preliminary participant outcomes and implementation successes and challenges in order to measure progress towards the program goals and provide considerations for ongoing and future programming. While some of that program context was again presented in this report's introduction, readers who wish to dive deeper into the findings can refer to the interim report (linked here) for additional context.

This final report, which presents data for the two-year period of July 2022 to August 2024, continues to focus on the impact of meaningful career experiences on program-engaged young people and employers and provides evidence for what makes the approach work best. This report further describes the overall effectiveness of the program, and the broader lessons learned to offer recommendations for state and local policy makers to consider. Employer, youth, and program coordinator quotes and youth profiles are shared throughout the report to highlight specific experiences and reflections of young people who benefitted from MCE-supported opportunities.

This evaluation used formative and summative data gathering and 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 was discussed in the interim report, JMG conducted a separate evaluation of its MCE-funded efforts. Therefore, the findings detailed in this report are based on CBO and ELO-engaged youth, program coordinators, and employers that engaged in evaluation activities and findings should be viewed within this context.

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?

MCE Evaluation Methodology

Approach

The Data Innovation Project employed a mixed methods evaluation design to gather formative and summative data about the MCE program. The evaluation team used both qualitative and quantitative methods to understand the program's implementation and progress towards participant outcomes. The evaluation used the following data tools: an online completion survey administered to CBO and ELO-engaged youth participants at the end of their experience; photovoice interviews to create profiles featuring youth participants across Maine; annual focus groups with ELO and CBO coordinators; and an online survey administered each year to a subset of employers identified by ELO and CBO coordinators.

While this report includes aggregate counts from program reports submitted by grantees of the Children's Cabinet pilot project and the Maine DOE ELO expansion project, the findings and implications are based on the insights of those who responded to the program evaluation activities. The Appendix provides details about each evaluation tool and the data collection processes deployed over the 2-year period.

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.

Limitations

This evaluation is subject to limitations that are important to keep in mind while reviewing the findings. First, while this sample is representative of the larger population engaged in the MCE programming, the number of youth participants and employers that completed a survey were a small sample of the overall population that engaged in MCE programming. Furthermore, recruitment strategies may have resulted in selection bias and employers and youth participants that had a very positive or negative program experience may have been more likely to agree to complete a survey when asked by a CBO or ELO coordinator or the DIP evaluation team. 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.

Second, because data were self-reported and program-related language varied from one school or community-based organization to the next, participants may have interpreted the questions differently. In particular, analysis showed that participants interpreted "paid" work experience inconsistently. This leads to the final limitation: the evaluation team reworded two questions to support more consistent interpretation in year two, and added new questions to the youth and employer surveys to gather additional insights. Consequently, there are instances where data across two years cannot be combined or findings for certain data points are only available for individual program years. These caveats are addressed and further detailed throughout the report when they arise.

Who Engaged in MCE Programming?

As a condition of the funding, Children's Cabinet pilot project and Maine DOE ELO expansion project grantees regularly submitted program reports over the two-year implementation period. Provided first are aggregate program participation counts as reported by programs and interpreted by the program evaluation team. Second, are the demographics of the youth, employers, and program coordinators who participated in program evaluation activities. Together, these data points offer insights about who engaged in MCE programing over the two years.

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Children's Cabinet Community-Based Organization (CBO)

The Children's Cabinet pilot project supported disconnected and under-represented youth in career exploration and meaningful paid work programming. Below displays the demographics of young people who engaged in or completed the job-readiness component of CBO programming and how they engaged, as reported by the five sites.

TARGET POPULATIONS

542 Total youth served

475	With Low Income
216	Of Color
190	With Disabilities
78	In the Juvenile Justice System
33	Experiencing Homelessness
6	In the Foster Care System
6	Tribal

COMPLETED PROGRAMMING

447 youth completed **Job-Readiness Programming**

298 youth completed **Paid Work Experiences**

COMPENSATION

$15.26 Average hourly wage for those that received compensation

EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT

89 Employers offered work experiences to CBO-engaged youth by the conclusion of year two

Maine DOE Extended Learning Opportunity (ELO) Expansion

The Maine DOE project expanded the ELO programs at 26 sites across Maine for students 16-22 years old. Below, are the two-year program participation data submitted by all ELO program coordinators for students and employers.†

Jobs for Maine Graduates

The following program data is for two years of JMG efforts that supported ELO expansion. Specifically, Maine students utilizing the ELO portal of the Learning Management System (LMS) to participate in the Maine Career Exploration Badge (MCEB) or in Extended Learning Opportunities (ELOs) that were credit-bearing and/or paid experiences.

PAID EXPERIENCES

1,833 Paid work experiences completed in total‡

1,310 For School Credit

523 Without Credit Attainment

BUSINESS & COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

2,089 New Community and Business Partnerships

6,776 Engagements
between students and community/business partners for informal extended learning opportunities (like job shadows, guest speakers, field trips)

CREDITS AWARDED

2,098.5 Credits awarded

148.5 Core

1,950.0 Elective

POPULATIONS SERVED

65% *of participants, on average, were identified each semester as* **historically underserved youth§**

LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

3,935 MCE Badges Received
received by Maine students who completed the experience

558 ELO Portal Participants*
on average per quarter

1,659 JMG Portal Participants
on average per quarter

COACHING & TRAINING

Provided by JMG to ELO Coordinators and/or School Administrators to support statewide ELO expansion

132 Trainings Provided   **2,707 Coaching Interactions**

† All 26 programs completed program reporting, representing a 100% completion rate.

‡ 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.

§ This percentage represents estimates. 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.

* These include students engaged in a DOE-funded ELO expansion site program and other ELO providers not funded by the grant.

Youth, Employers, and Program Coordinators

The following provides a description of the youth, employers, and program coordinators who engaged in evaluation activities.

Youth

Survey participants came from 28 of the 31 different program sites. Of the 322 youth that completed a survey at the end of their MCE program experience, 229 (72.7%) were engaged by an ELO program while 86 (27.3%) were engaged by a CBO program. The ratio of ELO to CBO survey participants is reflective of the participant distribution overall.

The majority of survey respondents (Table 3.) indicated their age as 16-17 years old (58.5%), their racial identity as white (87.5%), and their gender identity as female (64.2%).[††] Additionally, more than 3 in 4 participants (138 participants, 76.2%) indicated that someone in their immediate family attended college and almost two-thirds (207 participants, 65.3%) lived in an urban or suburban area based on the location of the program or school through which they participated.

TABLE 3. **Youth survey respondents**	
AGE[‡‡]	
16-17	165
18-21	113
22-24	4
RACIAL IDENTITY[§§]	
White	223
Non-White	32
GENDER[¶¶]	
Female	172
Male	93

There were notable demographic differences between the ELO- and CBO-engaged youth in this sample. While both CBO and ELO participants who engaged in the survey were more likely to be 16-17 years old, CBO sites had a slightly higher proportion of these youth (60.6% compared to 57.8% of ELO participants, p=0.002). Further, ELO participants had a higher proportion of individuals aged 18-21 (42.2%) than CBO participants (33.8%, p=0.002).[***] Additionally, the pool of CBO-engaged participants had a larger proportion of youth that identified with non-white races and ethnicities (24.6%), compared to ELO-engaged youth (9.0%, p=0.002).

†† Total responses for each demographic category ranged from 255 to 282.

‡‡ Program funding for ELO programming was for youth ages 16-22 while CBO programming engaged youth ages 16-24.

§§ 12.5%, or 32 participants identified six non-white races or ethnicities which included Black/African American, Multiracial, American Indian/Alaska Native, Latina, Hispanic, and Asian.

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

*** These results are significant, though CBO programming serves a wider age range of youth than ELO programming. The reason for this discrepancy is likely because the survey conducted during the first year of programming focused on graduating seniors, which may have skewed the results towards shorter-term ELO programs.

Employers

The 119 employers that completed a survey came from 48 different Maine towns and cities. Almost two-thirds (63.6%) of employers identified being located in a small town or rural area, while 36.4% identified an urban or suburban area.

Of the employers that provided a response (n=101), just under half identified as a for-profit (46.5%), over a third identified as a non-profit (35.6%) and the remaining 17.8% identified their business or organization type as municipal/quasi-governmental (Table 4.). The sample of MCE-engaged employers included 18 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.), Hospitality and Tourism, and Agriculture, Food, and Natural Resources.

The majority of employers (72.8%) indicated they were a small business owner, meaning their business or organization employs 1-49 employees. Meanwhile, one in 10 (19.4%) employers selected the category 50-499 employees, and the remainder (7.8%) indicated they had 500 or more employees.

Finally, many employers (57.3%) reported work experiences with one youth, followed by those who worked with 2-3 youth (26.5%), and four or more (16.2%).

Program Coordinators

Program coordinators were invited to attend one focus group in 2023 and one in 2024. Twenty of 26 ELO coordinators participated in at least one focus group across the two years, while six CBO participants attended at least one, representing four of the five CBO program sites. Fourteen of the 20 (70.0%) ELO programs identified as a new program site while six (30.0%) identified as a program that expanded because of MCE funding.

Focus group participants largely reflected the program's geographic spread and program site types including schools and districts, CTE programs, community-based organizations, and a public university.

TABLE 4.

Employer survey respondents

BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION TYPE

For profit	47
Non-profit	36
Municipal/Quasi-governmental	18

INDUSTRY TYPE

Education & Training	18
Health Science & Healthcare	13
Hospitality & Tourism	11
Agriculture, Food & Natural Resources	8
Animal Welfare & Veterinary	7
Government & Public Administration	7
Architecture & Construction	6
Arts, Audio/Video Technology & Communications	6
Social and Human Services	6
Finance & Accounting	4
Transportation, Distribution & Logistics	4
Manufacturing	3
Childcare	3
Marketing, Sales & Service	2
Law & Legal Services	1
Professional Services & Consulting	1
Public Safety, Corrections & Security	1
Retail	1

What MCE-Engaged Youth & Employers Gained

Across the board, program coordinators, youth participants, and employers overwhelmingly reported positive experiences with the Maine Career Exploration program. In fact, 98.6% of surveyed youth (n=293) *agreed* or *strongly agreed* with the statement, *I had a good experience in the program overall,* while 99.0% of surveyed employers (n=103) reported they would host a work experience again. Almost 9 of 10 (88.1%) employers were also *extremely likely* or *likely* to recommend an MCE work experience to another employer.

Feedback from youth, employers, and program coordinators consistently illustrated how the MCE program influenced positive changes in short- and long-term ways. Over the course of the two-year program evaluation, feedback highlighted improved academic experiences, growth in targeted 21st Century job-readiness skills and abilities, and enhanced social-emotional skills in areas like confidence and motivation. Program experiences also increased young peoples' understanding and awareness of post-secondary education and career opportunities, expanding youths' ideas of what was possible for their lives.[†††]

Furthermore, the MCE program helped youth develop adult connections and networks, increased employment and, for many youth, led to job offers from MCE-engaged employers. In addition to training and hiring new employees, program-engaged employers also gained experience working with the next generation of Maine workers and many relished the opportunity to build relationships with youth and MCE program staff. Moreover, employers emphasized the program's role in attracting talent to their industry or field and directly contributing to a workforce development pipeline. The following section provides specific insight into these accomplishments.

> " I now work better with my coworkers and peers in school. I know how to ask for help now in any situation where it's necessary … My program assisted me with a job and the job has change me as a person in so many ways.
>
> **ELO-ENGAGED YOUTH**

††† Unless it is otherwise stated, the 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. Likewise, any noteworthy differences between types of employers (i.e. non-profit vs for-profit, urban or rurally located, etc.), are detailed when applicable.

New academic experiences and pathways

Youth gained access to hands-on and community-based learning opportunities that were otherwise unavailable.

Page 22 →

21st Century job-readiness skills and abilities

Youth grew their problem-solving, communication, and teamwork skills and abilities.

Page 23 →

Social and emotional growth

Youth learned self-efficacy and saw an increase in their confidence, self-esteem, and motivation.

Page 24 →

Adult connections and networks

Youth gained new adult connections and received support that helped them take concrete steps towards their future goals.

Page 30 →

Clarity about future plans and opportunities

Youth learned about what they do and do not want in a future career and gained clarity around post-secondary pathways.

Page 36 →

Optimism about the future

Youths' participation in the program sparked excitement and optimism about their futures.

Page 38 →

Employment

Youth received job offers and gained employment.
Page 47 →

Employers gained an expanded workforce and helped develop a pipeline.
Page 49 →

Connections and relationships

Employers gained new and expanded existing connections with schools, community-based organizations, and Maine's next generation of workers.

Page 48 →

Youth Gains

New academic experiences and pathways

Career exploration activities, such as extended learning opportunities, can help close opportunity gaps among high school-aged students by diversifying learning options and providing funds for out-of-classroom experiences. They often also enable youth to gain credit for activities schools do not otherwise have.[6] This was true for MCE program-engaged youth and schools, especially in rural communities with small school districts, schools where career exploration programming was brand new, and for out-of-school youth engaged in the program.

During focus groups, ELO and CBO program coordinators explained how the MCE program enabled youth to have hands-on electives or community-based learning opportunities that were otherwise unavailable and how that provided an alternative pathway for educational achievement. ELO coordinators specified that because the program connected students to learning opportunities related to their interests, students were more academically engaged, especially those who struggled with traditional coursework or had high absenteeism. MCE-engaged students also earned credits that helped them graduate: ELO expansion sites awarded a total of 2,098.5 credits to students over two years of programming. Likewise, CBO coordinators explained how the MCE-program provided out-of-school youth with a pathway to complete the high school equivalency (HiSET) certificate. Survey data showed that more than one in four CBO-engaged youth (27%) reported that they had completed the HiSET because of their participation in the program.

Youth attributed improved academic experiences to the MCE program giving them greater variety and choice in their academic pursuits and that access to different types of content and structured learning increased their motivation to be engaged. For example, one ELO-engaged youth wrote, *"I got to choose something I wanted to do so I chose something I enjoyed,"* while another shared, *"I liked how we could do something we liked and wanted to do while still earning a credit."* Additionally, some youth identified how the program coordinator created a supportive environment by providing constant and consistent guidance and encouragement, which improved their academic experience. One CBO-engaged youth explained how the coordinator *"helped me navigate through everything,"* while an ELO-engaged youth shared, *"the teachers really helped when it got challenging."*

> ❝
>
> Everything I was learning was actually useful and that kept me interested.
>
> **CBO-ENGAGED YOUTH**

> ❝
>
> I feel more comfortable talking to adults and others and communicating my thoughts clearly.
>
> **CBO-ENGAGED YOUTH**

> ❝
>
> I think that ELOs have helped redefine what learning looks like.
>
> **ELO COORDINATOR**

21st Century job-readiness skills and abilities

Twenty-first 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.[7] The MCE program was designed to support youths' growth in these valuable foundational skills and abilities, specifically those related to job-readiness. Young people that participated in the program were asked to rate how much their skills, knowledge, or abilities changed due to participating on a scale of no change, some change, and major change. As exhibited in Figure 3., high percentages of youth participants reported some or major change in their communication (89.3%) and problem-solving (88.5%) skills, while 83.8% reported a change in their teamwork abilities.

Program-engaged youth self-identified that they were more prepared to be employees because of engaging in the program. In open-ended survey responses, youth's written responses frequently reflected improved communication skills (Figure 4.). In fact, the only theme that youth shared more often was how the program provided them with greater clarity about future careers or post-secondary pathways.

ELO and CBO coordinators frequently observed growth in young peoples' job readiness skills and overall employability. They described a range of skills youth gained during program participation like learning good work habits – such as showing up on time and following directions – to interviewing and resume-writing. Coordinators explained how the MCE-program support this growth by providing the opportunities needed to develop these foundational competencies. One CBO coordinator explained, *"So just having that first job experience under their belt kind of lets them go out into the world. They've now been through a job interview. They've had a job. They know what it means to sort of report to somebody or have a boss ... even that first step of just showing up when you're supposed to be. These are brand-new skills for many of these kids."*

FIGURE 3.

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

COMMUNICATION SKILLS — 89%

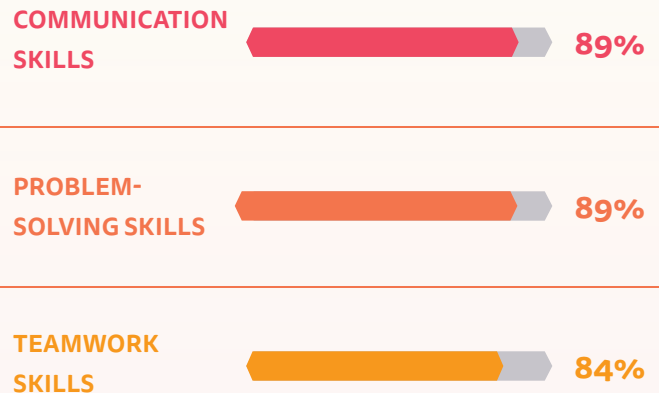PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS — 89%

TEAMWORK SKILLS — 84%

FIGURE 4.

Youth written survey responses reflected **improved communication skills.**

" *"Because of this experience I have gained more **public speaking skills** and **problem-solving skills** and **troubleshoot so much on a daily basis** now"*

" *"I've become a **stronger communicator**."*

" *"My **people skills** have **greatly improved**."*

❝ ⁙⁙⁙

My communication skills significantly improved because I was speaking with a professional with an extensive vocabulary in the field and I also just learned how to properly present myself to such an individual to gain respect as a high school student.

ELO-ENGAGED YOUTH

Furthermore, these 21st Century job-readiness abilities and skills are essential to the success of the next generation of Maine workers. The year two survey was expanded to include a question asking employers about what supports or skills young people need to be successful for working at their business. While some employers listed technical or specific skills like lifting 40lbs, an ability to work with animals, or a CNA license, the top skill areas employers identified were:

▶ Communication (including a willingness to ask questions)

▶ Motivation (like being a "self-starter" as well as having follow through)

▶ An interesting in learning, generally, and specifically about the field/services

▶ Ability to be flexible and adaptable

▶ Interpersonal skills and ability to work with others

▶ Professionalism (e.g. being on time, dressing appropriately, and customer service)

By providing young people with learning opportunities and experiences designed to support 21st Century job-readiness abilities and skills, the MCE program promoted positive outcomes for both youth and employers and supports Maine's emerging workforce.

❝ ⁙⁙⁙

My teamwork skills have improved because I used to not cooperate.

CBO-ENGAGED YOUTH

Social and emotional growth

Social and emotional development go hand-in-hand with acquiring 21st Century Skills and existing literature shows that career exploration activities have a positive impact on increased confidence, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and motivation because they provide structured and supported opportunities for increased self-awareness and skill development. These activities can be particularly helpful for youth that are struggling with motivation, setting goals, and taking initiative to plan for their future.[8,9]

❝ ⁙⁙

It is amazing to see students who do not do well in school become successful and PROUD of something they are doing.

ELO COORDINATOR

MCE program participants frequently detailed how the program helped youth build social-emotional skills that go beyond job-readiness. In particular, CBO and ELO coordinators and program-engaged youth pinpointed how exposure to new experiences and professional skills led youth to overcome anxiety related to current and future job-seeking as well as day-to-day life pressures. For example, a CBO-engaged youth wrote about now *"feeling a lot more comfortable reaching out to businesses/ people about jobs,"* while an ELO-engaged youth shared how the program *"opened up so many opportunities and made me feel less stressed about my path in life after high school!"* Additionally, some coordinators observed a reduction in absenteeism from school and in behavioral issues among program participants.

In focus groups and program reports, CBO and ELO coordinators detailed the significant growth they observed in youths' confidence, self-esteem, empowerment, self-efficacy, and motivation. They attributed this to youth getting to engage with adults and community members, build relationships, and practice social-emotional skills in settings that present different dynamics than school. As one ELO coordinator explained, *"The ELO program has helped youth to go out, be treated like adults, find their value, and find their worth. They realize that while you weren't a good student, you're still a good person, and success in the program really drives it home for them … So, for a lot of those kids I've just seen dramatic growth in their whole self-identity over the course of these ELOs and it's massive."* Both ELO and CBO coordinators described how these gains were particularly important in wake of the increased social-emotional challenges youth faced during and after the pandemic.

> We had a student who said how they feel their mental health has improved greatly since starting this experience. … It has made their senior year that much better.
>
> **ELO COORDINATOR**

Ryan | From uncertain and worried to confident and clear

Oceanside High School, RSU 13, Knox County

Work Experience Placement: Blake Vets

When the principal offered Ryan, then a rising senior at Oceanside High School, the choice of a fourth-period study hall or an internship class, Ryan picked the class.

"I asked him about it," Ryan recalled, "and he told me a little bit about it, and I was like, 'I want to do this. This sounds really cool.' I was worried, because it was my senior year, and I had no idea what I was going to do."

Now, he knows.

The class led Ryan to Blake Vets in Northport, where he found that his natural affinity for animals was a key asset. "I have a big connection to animals," he explained. "I always have. I love all types of animals. And I just feel like a strength that I brought is my compassion and care when it comes to pets, and people, as well. People are very happy seeing their pets warm up to me."

But Ryan's love of pets also created challenges. It made him care — a lot — about doing things right during his internship at the practice. That created pressure when things went wrong. "A skill that I learned was how to manage high-stress scenarios," Ryan said, when explaining why one picture he took showed a dog upside down on a table. The dog in the photo had woken up before surgery began and had to be anesthetized again. "There's so many things that can go wrong during the preparation for surgery," Ryan said.

A resource that helped me through this

"
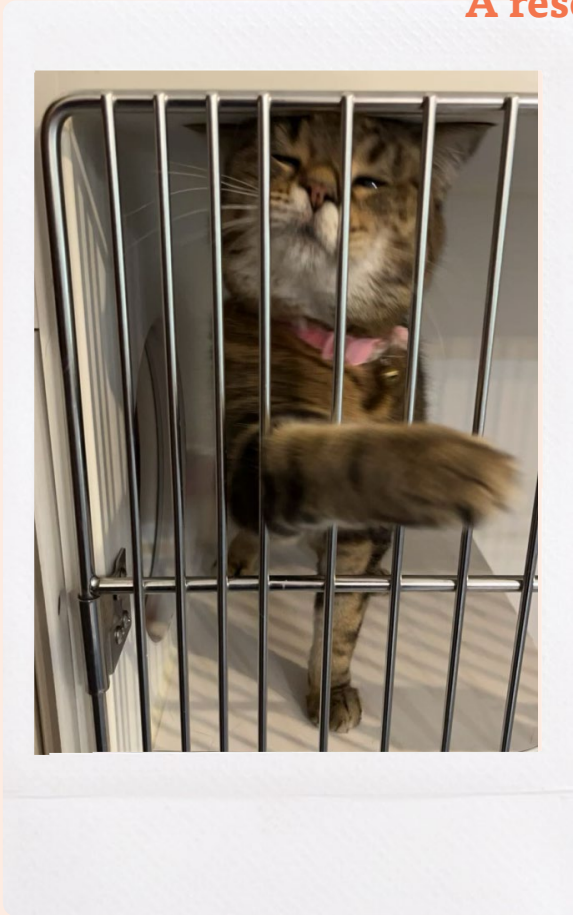
Something that I connected with and that helped me, like a resource, was just seeing the help that … these people have done to animals like this. This is a rescue cat that was found on the side of the road with a broken leg. And they give her all the support and love that she needed, and she's very happy right now. This is her reaching — I was rubbing her as much as I could through the bars. This is me starting to walk away and she tries to get more. So just seeing how lives are impacted, not just animals, but people's lives are impacted with this really helped.

And when he witnessed a pet reacting with fear during a necessary procedure, Ryan recalled, "I had to remind myself that this is helping the animal, even if they're scared and they're angry. Reminding myself, and the people that were around me, helped me get through this."

The professionals at the practice encouraged him as he learned about the realities of healing pets. "Having a doctor who's been a veterinarian for years and years tell you that she sees that you can also become one — it meant a lot to me," he said.

He's been accepted into the UMA veterinary technician program. The vets he interned with assured him that, if he applies for a job after he graduates, they'll give him preferential consideration. He also lined up work for the summer at an animal shelter.

"With the internship and with Molly [his ELO Coordinator] and with all the connections that I've made, it's just further cemented the fact that I want to be this, even after seeing the good and the bad," Ryan said.

Photo Prompt

A connection I've made

" This is Dr. McGill, one of the doctors that were at Blake Vets for the four or five times that I visited. She and I really connected. She told me that I have the skill that I was born with, like, to connect with animals. … She supported me as soon as she met me. She was excited to hear all about me, what I planned to do, what I want to do there. She listened to that, and she gave me help in doing what I wanted to do.

His confidence blossomed, too. When asked to identify the most important lesson he took from his ELO placement, Ryan replied, "How to speak for myself."

Before, he explained, "I was just kind of like, 'I'm fine, I'm doing good, I'm OK with everything,' even if I wasn't entirely sure I was. I'm a lot more independent and I say what I want and how I feel a lot more now."

He went on. "There's so many things that I also want to talk about on top of this. Like how I've truly opened up and become a more social person during this period of this year. At the beginning of the year, I was very reserved. Like I didn't say much about me, I didn't talk that much. But I've really started to open up and show who I am as a person, and those are a couple things that I've just learned throughout the year."

The internship and the class, he said, helped him find his way. "When it comes to normal classes, it's like, you learn something, you remember it, you do a test on it. It's just a linear path," he said. "But when it comes to ELO, it's like, some days, you don't have to, like if you're not feeling it, you don't have to do something, and if you want and you're willing to, you can grow so much in the span of just a little bit."

"You have to put in energy to get as much out of this as you want to," Ryan explained. "This ELO and everything, it's a lot more oriented toward you, and the path of growth is dependent on what you decide it to be."
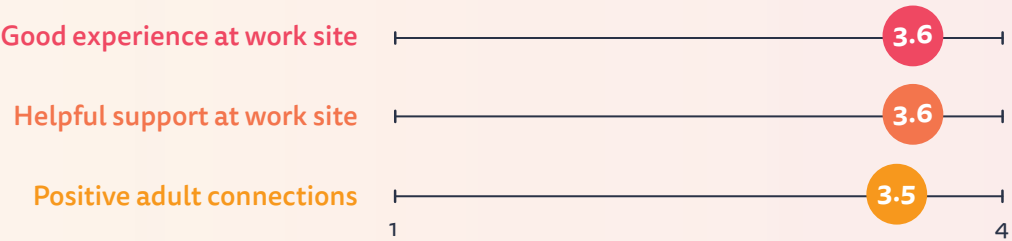
Adult connections and networks

Career exploration offers a framework to connect students to adults and these developmental relationships can help young people discover who they are, develop abilities, and learn how to engage with and contribute to the world around them. These connections foster confidence and self-efficacy for youth and connect them to opportunities that further their career and educational vision during and beyond high school.[10,11,12]

Program participant data showed that almost all youth (95.9%) gained new adult connections by working closely with adults during work experiences and other career related activities. 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. When asked, almost all youth (96.9%) thought the support they received from adults at their work site was helpful. As youth deepened these connections, it became clear to them that adults were there to support their skill development and that they would also help them with concrete steps towards their future goals. For example, one ELO-engaged youth shared, *"The teacher who was assisting me was an especially large key to my current and future success,"* while another wrote, *"I was able to see just how willing companies in Maine are to train kids in their careers."*

> " I loved the connection that I had made with my teacher during my work experience ... She was very interested in my hobbies and always giving me extra opportunity's to stay involved.
>
> **ELO-ENGAGED YOUTH**

FIGURE 5.

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

	1		4
Good experience at work site		3.6	
Helpful support at work site		3.6	
Positive adult connections		3.5	

Youths' connections with adults expanded their networks while also exposing them to experiences that increase their understanding about what careers they want to pursue and about what opportunities exist in their community. For example, an ELO-engaged youth wrote, *"I have a lot more connections with people in the business world and I now know a lot more about the different types of business. It helped me narrow down what I might want to pursue someday."* Another shared, *"While doing this program I became more generally involved in what happens in my community and at my school, and because of that I became a lot more aware of the opportunities around me."*

> " The skills I gained from my mentor allowed me to create this documentary.
>
> **ELO-ENGAGED YOUTH**

" I was successful because of the extensive help that was provided when I was confused or frustrated ... working with youth can be stressful but management taught me how to handle each situation.

CBO-ENGAGED YOUTH

Nine of 10 youth (88.5%) reported having increased knowledge about career opportunities in Maine after participating in the program.

CBO and ELO program coordinators also shared positive examples of how adult connections and network building supported youth to develop new abilities and learn about existing opportunities. For example, one ELO coordinator described how these relationships helped, *"foster that sense of community through their personal networks. At the end of the program, they all recognize their networks ... which helps youth find their stance in the world."* Additionally, coordinators identified how exposure through programs like the MCE program is especially important for youth who face systemic barriers to accessing the relationships and resources needed to succeed in education and work. For example, one rurally located coordinator shared, *"It's just been deeply impactful for everyone across the board. And I just want to highlight the narrative of how there's no success in rural Maine, and kids can't stay here, and you need to leave to be successful. For me, the thing I most enjoyed about the ELOs is just helping kids connect to meaning and relevance in these small communities and just helping them expand the ideas of what you can do in your small rural area."*

YOUTH PARTICIPANT PROFILE

Natalie | A river of connection, communication, and growth

Yarmouth High School, Cumberland County

Work Experience Placement: Royal River Conservation Trust, Wabanaki First Nations

"The reason you start your ELO does not define your ELO," noted Natalie. "I started this for fun to learn a language because I was bored with the Romance languages in school. And then it turned into something so much more."

Natalie's first ELO placement led to a river of experiences that connected the Yarmouth High School student with her heritage, transformed her into a passionate communicator, and introduced her to a bevy of community organizations that welcomed her into their work.

"I'm more naturally quiet, so it's kind of weird to be, like, this leader, this big public figure that apparently people like to consider me now," she said. Recently selected by the Portland Press Herald as one of the top ten graduates to watch in the state of Maine, Natalie has been accepted at Dartmouth College. "I know, realistically, I probably wouldn't have gotten in without all of the stuff I've done, but also … it shifted."

"I'm a Maliseet Native American from Tobique First Nation, but I've lived here my whole life," Natalie explained. "I started my ELO as a thing investigating my language and my culture with Imelda Perley, who is my mentor. …She's an amazing person. She basically started the whole language conservation program at University of New Brunswick, just a really inspiring person."

Perley, a Maliseet elder, met with Natalie every week. "Having that personal connection to so many people on the reservation up in New Brunswick and having the opportunity to meet with Imelda every single week is something I wouldn't have gotten to do if I was a different person," Natalie said. "My grandmother grew up on the reservation. But none of the rest of my family really did, because she went to residential school. She didn't want her oldest children to have to go to it as well, so she moved to New York. So, it's not something that my part of the family has been really connected to in a while."

What else should we know about the photos you took?

" I guess they represent something more important than just pictures. … I'm not doing it for credit, I'm doing it because it's something that needs to be done, and it's something that's important. … It's actually making an impact on the world, not just on me, but on the community. These pictures are just representative of the ways this has helped me help other people and I think that's something that's just really important, especially nowadays.

A skill I've learned

> The majority of these are from some hikes I've led with Royal River Conservation Trust, which is where I'm doing my internship. … It's definitely something that I would say I've gotten a lot better at. I think part of that is just practice but also being in an environment like this where people want to be there and want to hear what I have to say.

Impressed with Natalie's work, her ELO Coordinator talked about her during a meeting of an equity task force that included some members from YCARE, the Yarmouth Community Alliance for Racial Equity. Some of its members attended Natalie's ELO presentation and invited her and her parents to join them. The meetings were held at the headquarters of the Royal River Conservation Trust, which eventually offered Natalie a paid internship, her second ELO.

While her first ELO connected her with her Native American heritage and extended members of her own family, her second taught her how to share that indigenous knowledge and history back out, leading hikes along the Royal River with new mentors the trust introduced her to, experts in ethnobotany and working with kids and nature.

"Luckily, it's a situation where everyone is interested in learning," Natalie said of the hikes she and her mentors led. "It's not like they're forced to be there. So, it was a very welcoming community, but it was still talking in front of people that I didn't know, or at least, didn't know very well. Pretty much unlike anything I've ever done before. It was definitely a learning curve."

She already was working on one Royal River project through YCARE. That group's effort to formally give a Penobscot name to what is locally called First Falls brought Natalie's linguistic knowledge into play and taught her some hard lessons about bureaucracy. Although the waterfall didn't have a legal name, applying one required buy-in from the U.S. Geological Survey, the Penobscot Nation, and the town, and the project raised historical

language issues that led Natalie to seek guidance from Imelda. "The fact that simple things can be such a pain anyway -- even if they don't necessarily need to be, they find a way to be," Natalie said with a smile. "I guess, messing with bureaucracy is something I've had to do. That's more of a challenge than a skill at this point. Still working on that."

Through her work with the Royal River Conservation Trust, Natalie learned of the Royal River Alliance, and got involved with its dam removal effort. She spoke about their progress at the alliance's World Fish Migration Day at Royal River Park in May. Other activities have included being on a panel for Youth and Climate Action and participating in monthly Wabanaki youth group meetings in Freeport.

Natalie said that her Native American heritage was the most important thing she brought to the ELO program. It provided unique opportunities for growth and connection that, in turn, fostered a desire to share what she was learning. "Having that inspiration and that history I guess makes me much more passionate about the project and the kind of stuff that I'm doing. ... I think it gives me more interest in doing it than a lot of other

people, more reason to, more motivation."

Her heritage also influenced how she learned. "I'd say I used a couple of random Google searches and a couple of books that were my grandmother's or that people have recommended to me, but for the most part it's just been talking with people," Natalie explained. "We have a very strong oral tradition in general, so those are kind of the biggest ways in which I've actually learned anything."

When asked whether her ELO experiences have affected her future path, Natalie said, "I think this is probably the most influential thing I've ever done. ...I would say it's hard for me to picture what my life would be like right now if I hadn't done it, because it's been so integral to what I've been doing. It's changed both what I've been able to do in the future and what I want to do in the future, because linguistics and Native American stuff is so much more important than I expected it to be. ...It's something that I really want to make a part of my future no matter what I end up doing."

FIGURE 6.

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

Awareness of	*Understanding of*	*Impact on*
89%	**88%**	**84%**
CAREER OPPORTUNITIES IN MAINE	**FUTURE GOALS + ASPIRATIONS**	**FUTURE PLANS**
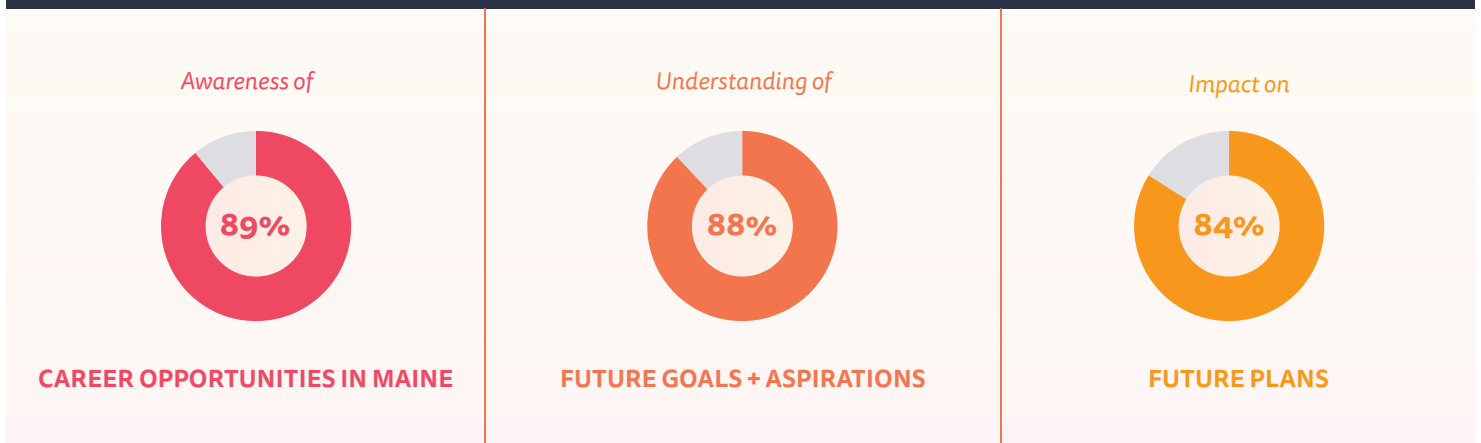
Clarity about future plans and opportunities

Exposure to workplace culture, skills, and environments through career exploration can help youth test their career interests and inform the course of their future.[13] Engaging in career exploration enables youth to have experiences that help them learn about what they do and do not like about a specific job or field and to improve their decision-making around what they want their future to look like. Furthermore, seeking and gaining information about what life after high school looks like increases young people's sense of interest in their own personal and professional growth and pathways.[14]

Participant data overwhelmingly showed that because of their engagement in the MCE program, youth gained clarity about post-secondary pathways. For some young people, it meant starting to plan for their future for the first time, while others said that learning about options in their field of interest or a field they were unaware of helped them narrow their focus and select a more specific pathway to pursue. In fact, according to survey respondents (Figure 6.), almost nine of 10 youth (88.5%) reported some or major change in their awareness of career opportunities in Maine while 87.6% of youth gained an increased understanding of their goals and aspirations for the future. A high percentage of youth (84.2%) also reported that the MCE program impacted their future plans.

Youth most frequently used open-ended survey responses to share how participating in the MCE program clarified their future career path. In many of these responses, they also expressed increased confidence in their plan specifically due to having hands-on, applied experience in their careers of interest. For example, one ELO-engaged youth shared, *"It had helped me decide what I do and don't want for my future through experience and research."* while another said, *"Actually doing the job made me realize that I do want to do what I thought I had wanted to do. I cannot wait to start college."*

> " It is equally important for our students to realize what they thought they were so passionate about, truly isn't something they want to pursue in their future.
>
> **ELO COORDINATOR**

> " This program helped me tremendously to fully understand and accept what I wanted to do in the future.
>
> **ELO-ENGAGED YOUTH**

Youth wrote about gaining skills in areas like film production, carpentry, coding, managing a classroom, welding, and practicing elements of emergency medicine. In about two dozen instances where youth reported that the program did not meaningfully impact future plans, most explained it was because they already had an idea of what they wanted to do. Still, for many, the experience confirmed that idea or plan. Cementing a future plan or learning about want you do not want to do may save youth time and money in the future as they pursue their interests.

> **"**
>
> I think the job service I chose is unlikely to be a future option for me, but I can see how it could be for others. It was another experience to check off my list for the future, though.
>
> **ELO-ENGAGED YOUTH**

Youth and coordinators both detailed how these experiences helped young people learn how to achieve their goals, including making a plan for how to get there. For example, youth participants detailed that they learned about requirements for pursuing their career interests, including the job application process and increased knowledge of certification, training, and educational requirements. One ELO coordinator detailed how they have seen *"increased student engagement in their academic planning to work towards a goal."* Another shared that, *"It has really empowered students to think about their connections between what they're doing now and where they want to be … when students say I'm going to get a job after high school, they actually have one now."*

When asked about their future plans, over half (58.5%) of MCE participants indicated they planned to start college in the future, while 29.4% were planning to look into college (Table 5.). Three of 10 participants (32.2%) were planning to start a job, while nearly a fourth of participants (23.9%) planned to start their own business. Participants also mentioned training certificate programs, volunteering, technical school, the military, and apprenticeships, although these plans were less common.

TABLE 5.

FUTURE PLANS

Start college	58%
Look for a job	35%
Start a job	32%
Look into college	29%
Start my own business	24%
Start a career training or certification program	12%
Undecided	11%
Start a technical school program	7%
Volunteer activity (e.g. AmeriCorps)	7%
Registered apprenticeship	4%
Military service	4%
Other	4%

> **"**
>
> I didn't really know what to do before and this program completely changed my thought process and I found something I am more interested in then I was before.
>
> **CBO-ENGAGED YOUTH**

Optimism about the future

When young people have the chance to explore, they develop self-awareness and start to realize the possibilities available to them. This is particularly true for career exploration programs because the introduction and connection to possible pathways helps young people develop a vision of their future.[15] Accordingly, two years of survey responses demonstrated that the MCE program experience sparked young people's excitement and optimism about their future. Nine of 10 youth (92.5%) reported agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement, *I feel more optimistic about my future after participating in the program.*

Youth further clarified the program's effect in open-ended responses like this one from a CBO-engaged youth, *"[the program] made me think that anything is possible,"* and from an ELO-engaged youth, *"This experience has given me opportunities to explore who I am and what I would like to do with my life."* CBO and ELO coordinators also observed how the program's positive impact on young people had a ripple effect which benefitted families and communities by extending a sense of opportunity and hope for the future. One CBO coordinator described how positive outcomes for engaged youth motivated their family members and friends to join the program while an ELO coordinator described how a presentation given by an ELO-engaged youth gave to the community hope that young people will come back and join the local workforce. One ELO coordinator pinpointed how this optimism is due to the empowerment the program brings. They shared, *"I keep coming back to that word empowerment. They just know now that there are options, and they have someone to talk to about it. And then they're talking to more adults. You know, other teachers, their parents. There's just more conversation happening everywhere."*

> " I learned a lot about myself and my community. Specifically, how I can choose a meaningful career path and improve my community.
>
> **ELO-ENGAGED YOUTH**

> " The class saved my life because I had no hope for anything, and I always wanted to learn more important information from school, but I was always scared.
>
> **ELO-ENGAGED YOUTH**

YOUTH PARTICIPANT PROFILE

Hannah | Contacts, college, career – her path is clear

Sacopee Valley High School, MSAD 55, Oxford County

Work Experience Placement: Sacopee Veterinary Clinic

"I feel totally ready," said Hannah, a Sacopee Valley High School student, at the end of the interview about her ELO. "I know when I graduate next year, I'm ready."

She did not always feel that way. Hannah knew she wanted to do something with animals, but did not know where to start. She first considered working with large animals, but found horses to be intimidatingly large. She tried to set up an experience at a small-animal emergency hospital or at a large, corporate practice, but kept getting no for an answer. Then her ELO coordinator put her in touch with Sacopee Veterinary Clinic, a relatively modest operation. "She just called them, and they said that I could go in," recalled Hannah. "So, that's when I started going there, and that's when I decided I really want to do this, I love this."

Hannah loved her ELO so much that she wanted to keep doing it. "It's a lot better than coming to school and sitting in my math class," Hannah explained. "[W]hen I go to the vet clinic, I really get to see everything I actually want to do, and it really just kept me wanting to go back. With them being so nice and always answering any question I had or anything I wanted to know, it really made me feel welcome and invited."

She saw a lot — how X-rays are taken ("seeing how that works was cool"), how tools are maintained ("you have to wash them and scrub them and put them [in an] ultrasonic cleaner") and how the clinic prepares an animal for surgery.

Photo prompt

Images that represent different aspects of your experience

" This one was very cool, doing the X-Rays, seeing how that works was cool, and this back here, that was the dental X-Ray machine, so that was cool too.

"

This one, because Kelsey's in there, and she's helped me a lot. ...I feel like watching the vet techs and vet assistants interact with the patients, I really liked that. Kelsey — one of the biggest things that she really liked to do was inform the animal's parents what they should be doing and how to do it, so that way they know. You're really helping the animals when you're talking to the parents, because it's not like a dog can tell you, 'My paws are hurting because you don't clean them, my ears are hurting because they're not clean.'

"One of my Dad's friends, his dog slipped a disc in his back," Hannah recalled. "So, one day, I went in there, and because I didn't know what it was, I said 'Hey, Kelsey, my dad's friend, his dog slipped a disc in his back, what does that mean?' And we were talking about it, and then the doctor came over and was like, 'Come in here … there's a computer over here.' … And he pulled up an X-Ray of a dog who had come in and slipped a disc. And he was like, 'This is what it looks like, this is what it does.' So that's pretty cool, being able to talk to them about things that are happening."

When she job shadowed at Mainely Veterinary Dentistry in Windham, Hannah watched the vet extract teeth from a cat and helped hold the patient. "Every time I'm there she has me put gloves on and help," Hannah said.

Although initially disappointed she hadn't been able to work in big hospital, Hannah discovered that the scale of the Sacopee Valley Clinic was advantageous. Her mentor, Kelsey, explained that veterinary technicians in smaller offices are likely to do more varied work. At Sacopee Valley, Hannah was part of a small team. "I think it was really nice, because I knew everybody there, and they all knew me, and it was really personal getting to know everybody, and they were helping me," she said.

Her favorite part was interacting with the pet parents. "Doing that was really fun, because the pet parents were always, like, 'Oh, you're learning to be a vet tech? That' so cool! Do you want to pet my little puppy?' and I was, like, 'Yes, I want to pet your puppy!'" Hannah recalled, laughing.

Photo prompt

Which photo represents this program best?

That comfort level with complete strangers was one of the big lessons Hannah learned. At the beginning of her ELO, just walking in the front door of the clinic made her nervous.

"I'm young, I have no idea about being a vet tech, and I know nobody there, so having to go in there just being like, 'Hi, I'm here, I want to see what you do!' — that was a challenge for me," she said. "But doing this ELO definitely helped me overcome that challenge. I definitely feel more comfortable walking into a place where I don't know anybody and talking to people who I don't know."

The structure of the ELO and how it fit within the rest of her life allowed it all to happen. "I'm a very busy student athlete and I have a lot of dogs and a lot of things going on," she explained. "I play soccer, basketball, and softball. I'm able to do my ELO during the school day. If it was afterschool, I wouldn't be able to do it."

When asked how she would describe this program to someone unfamiliar with it, Hannah said, "I would say that ELO is ... a really great way to learn about careers you want, so that way, when you go to college, you're not wasting your degree," Hannah said. "Because a lot of people do that, and I definitely don't want to do that."

She discussed the York County Community College veterinary technician program with Kelsey, who graduated from that program. Hannah took a tour of the campus and also met with a representative of Unity about that veterinary technician program. She also was offered a summer job at Sacopee Valley Clinic, which she accepted.

"When I'm done with college, I know what I want to do, and I have connections with people that I want to do things with."

Della | A change of course, maybe

Oceanside High School, RSU 13, Knox County

Work Experience Placement: The Riley School, Rockland

Della knew what she wanted to do. She wanted to be a lawyer.

But when her guidance counselor told her she could take an internship class during her last semester as a senior at Oceanside High, she said, "Well, that sounds like really fun. Let's do that."

It was fun. "It's the best class I've ever taken at school," said Della. "It doesn't even feel like a class. It feels like kind of a big field trip all the time. There's so much to do."

It began with training, led by the ELO Coordinator. "We did a lot of class stuff to prepare me for it," Della explained. "I was super anxious going into it. I was like, 'Oh my gosh, I'm going to go to someone's office and meet with them. I don't know what to do, what to talk about!' She really prepared me for that piece. I've gained a lot of confidence."

Della did visit an attorney. But she also had an internship at the Riley School in Rockport, watching the teachers there and helping them out. "I worked with two groups of students," she explained. "I worked with kids

from 2 to 4 years old, and then I worked with kids that were 5 to 9."

In her three days at the school, Della learned how chicks and fish and tortoises could be used to entice kids into a group, how to teach children to make cranes from paper (a skill she learned on the fly), and how to survive the challenge of managing 4-year-olds supplied with blocks of clay that had to be shared.

They were all new experiences that Della had never even considered. "Before starting the internship, teaching would never have come to my mind," she said. "I'd be like, 'No, absolutely not. No kids.'"

But the purpose of the class was to explore her options. "You shouldn't hesitate to go and learn more about something you want to do," Della said. "Like I wanted to be an attorney really bad. And then, I went to an attorney's office, and I'm like, 'This is fun, but like, is there something else I can do? What other opportunities are there out for me in the world?' Cause there's infinite things you can do. There's always something else that you can find that you might like better, so it's good to try it while you have the chance."

When she took a chance and tried teaching, Della found herself influenced by the professionals in the classroom. "I formed a really strong connection with the art teacher while I was there," Della said. "She really like dug me deep into it, and she showed me the good sides of teaching and the really bad sides of teaching. We really had to learn like, if this is something I really want to do, how do I want to do this, how do I want to take that approach and move forward. ... Watching her teach was a really big example for me."

The internship experience brought new thoughts to Della's mind. "I feel like it really helped me make up my decision. Like, do I want to be a teacher? Do I want to teach this age of kids? Is this something I really want to do? And it really opened my mind up to, I guess a bigger picture, instead of being so narrow-minded. I really saw there's so many other things out there that I can be," Della said.

No matter what, she thinks the new connections she's built with the teachers she's met will last. "I feel like if there's ever a time that I'm confused or need advice on something, I could always go to them and they'd help me," she said.

She hasn't made up her mind about what she wants to do, other than her goal of attending college. Della's ELO Coordinator was still lining up more opportunities when this interview was conducted, including a meeting with a labor and delivery nurse and another with someone working in animal science.

> " The picture of my face, I really feel like shows the patience that I learned. Working with kids is not as easy as I thought it was going to be. There's a lot more to it than just helping them solve addition problems, 'cause they're also looking at real-life problems. ... The kids don't know that they frustrate me.

Photo prompt:

A challenge I overcame

But Della has figured out one thing. "After reading about 100 children's books, I've decided that I'd rather work with older children," she said with a laugh.

As for the internship course, Della called it "a big class of opportunity."

"You can discover so many different work interests that you have," she said. "Even if it's something you've never thought of doing before, you can go in and say like, 'I wanna try something like this,' and she'll set something up or find someone for you to talk to. And you can really get a connection and learn what you want to do. ..."

"If you're thinking about it, just do it."

" We had to put on their raincoats. ... We had to get like 12 students in this little corner here, and I had to help them all dress in their rainsuits and put on their boots. And some kids wanted theirs on before the others, and they couldn't form a line. That was very challenging. ... I guess I just had to remind myself like they're kids, they don't know how to do this yet, and my example is what's going to show them how they can act when they're older, that I need to lead by example.
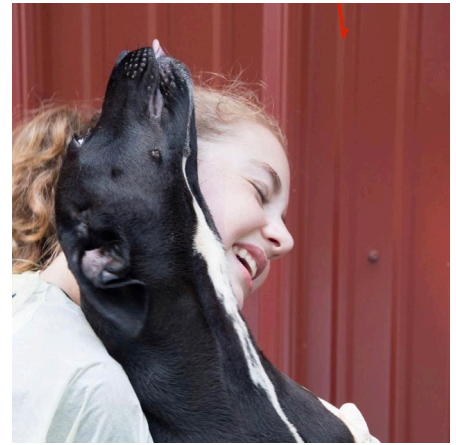
Employment

When young people have the opportunity to work, they gain exposure to new careers and pathways, developing foundational competencies and practical skills that increase their employability. Furthermore, studies show that young people (ages 16-18) who are connected to the workforce have an increased likelihood of employment as an adult, higher future earnings, and increased job quality.[16,17] These improved outcomes appear to be particularly poignant for youth who face increased barriers to social and economic upward mobility.[18,19]

As previously noted, by supporting initial work experiences, the MCE program helped many youth step into the workforce for the first time. Data showed that these MCE work experiences often led to job offers. Among the evaluations sample of 255 program-engaged youth that indicated they had a work experience, just over one-third (32.5%, n=83) of young people indicated that they received a job offer because of participating in the work experience. Of these, 64 (77.1%) accepted the job they were offered. Meanwhile, two in five (40.8%) employers that completed a participant survey reported they offered a job to a young person with 24 of the 42 (77.1%) employers hiring at least one former participant when the work experience ended. Additionally, ELO and CBO coordinators detailed how youth were also 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.

Looking at two years of data, it appears that paid experiences led to paid work (Figure 7.), as MCE-engaged youth that reported a paid work experience were more likely to be offered a job (41.3%) compared to those that reported they were unpaid (22.1%, p=0.0043). These youth were also more likely to accept the position: 78.8%, compared to 61.9% who engaged in an unpaid experience, though these results were not significant at the p=0.05 level. CBO-engaged youth were significantly more likely to be offered a job (48.1%) than ELO-engaged youth (27.5%, p=0.004).

FIGURE 7.

Youth with paid experience were nearly twice as likely to be offered a job.

Percent of youth that reported receiving a job offer by work experience type

| PAID | 41% |
| UNPAID | 22% |
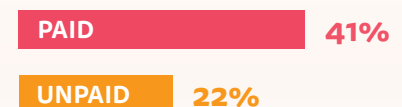
Employer Gains

Connections and relationships

Through the MCE program, employers have gained new connections and expanded existing ones with schools, community-based organizations, and Maine's next generation of employees. Employers appreciated that the MCE program gave them opportunities to build relationships with young people, program coordinators, and other program staff and wrote about how the program helped strengthen community partnerships. Some employers identified how relationships with young people meant engaging in learning that was mutually beneficial. One employer shared, *"It was awesome to see the enthusiasm of our young person. We learned as much from her as she learned from us. I would recommend this to other employers, and hope we have the opportunity to continue this experience in the future."* Employers used works like "enriching," "valuable," "rewarding," and "amazing" to describe their experiences and 65.4% said they benefitted from participating because it provided them with information about the next workforce generation's skills.

> ❝
>
> We are thrilled to have young people involved in our projects. They are the future.
>
> MCE-ENGAGED EMPLOYER

Employers also viewed the program-supported relationships as strengthening Maine's workforce by contributing to *"needed mentoring and support networks that young individuals could use."* These employers readily engaged in the program to build connections and relationships that support this network and the next generation of workers. One employer shared this collective sentiments when they wrote, *"I believe in young people learning how to be in the job force. Teaching the younger generation how to communicate, how to have a job successfully, how to build rapport with your coworkers: these are all very important things that I am happy to help teach the younger people in our community."*

> ❝
>
> Working with my student was an amazing and enriching experience for both of us. I learned so much about myself throughout the process and feel very confident about working with students again in the future.
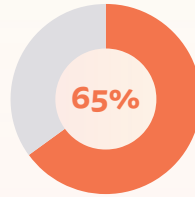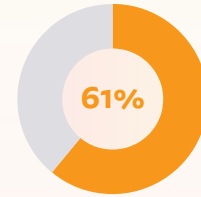>
> MCE-ENGAGED EMPLOYER

FIGURE 8.

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

77%
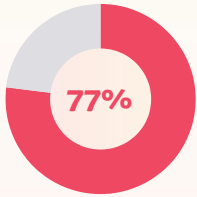
ATTRACTING TALENT TO YOUR INDUSTRY/FIELD

65%

PROVIDING YOU INFORMATION ABOUT THE NEXT WORKFORCE GENERATION'S SKILLS

61%

ADDRESSING WORKFORCE SHORTAGES

Expanded workforce and pipelines

As previously detailed, many employers offered jobs to and hired the young people they hosted for an MCE work experience. Over two years of programming, 40.8% of surveyed employers reported offering young people a job because of the MCE-program workforce experience. From the coordinator perspective, the biggest benefit of MCE program participation for employers, both in the short- and long-term, was hiring youth participants to become part-time or full-time employees.

Employers agreed: three of four surveyed employers (76.8%) thought the program yielded a moderate or major benefit of attracting talent to industries/fields and the majority (61.3%) thought the program helped address workforce shortages (Figure 8.). For some, the program helped them fill open positions and provided much needed assistance. One employer shared, *"We are desperate for help."* Other MCE-engaged employers readily connected the dots that the time and effort they put in now would benefit Maine's workforce down the road. For example, one wrote, *"It's important to expose students to working environments, that have never worked. It is very important to provide experiences and education to our young adults to get them ready for life after school."*

In addition to many MCE-engaged young people 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. This suggests that the MCE program contributes to Maine's workforce development pipeline in the longer-term that employers will benefit from. As one employer shared, *"This experience is valuable beyond estimate. The future workforce depends on the connections between employer and the potential employee. This is a great way for students to verify expectations and see what work life can be."*

Jamie | The first step on an exciting path

Brewer High School, Penobscot County

The Maine Construction Academy Pre-Apprenticeship Program

When Jamie, a rising senior at Brewer High, entered the Maine Construction Academy, she was certain of some things and uncertain about others.

A longtime friend had participated in the program the previous summer, so Jamie knew she might be a good match. "I've always been a hands-on person," she said. "I just like working and building stuff." She also knew, though, that in at least one other way she might not fit in. "As a woman going into construction," she pointed out, "you have to understand that there's going to be some bias, like opinions against you." As it turned out, Jamie ranked the social lessons the program taught her as highly as those about saws, hammers, and nails.

"Coming into this academy, it made me realize that as much as that stigma is there to be against you, like, you still have to do it. Even if you're a woman and you're in here doing this, people are going to accept you and people are going to want to help you and want to see you do good."

"I had this idea coming in that, because I was a woman going into a man's job, that it was going to be like nobody wanted me there. But it's really the community, like, people. We need workers in construction and these types of hard labor jobs. It doesn't really matter what you are and where you come from. Everyone's accepting because we all need help at the end of the day."

In fact, it was the 10 other students in the program that kept Jamie coming back. Some were from her high school and other schools while others came from the Job Corps program. "It's a really nice community that

we've kind of built here," Jamie said. "Like it started off strained as every new environment is. But you grow really comfortable, 'cause it's basically like school during the summer, but with a smaller group. We've become kind of tightknit. We're all friends now. We're kind of close."

It helped that Jamie brought certain strengths with her. "I know I'm really efficient," she said. "I work really well with a team. I work in a pizza kitchen outside of school, so I'm really fast. I can work under time limits and thought that was really good for everyone. 'Cause sometimes we get stressed here with everything that we do, and it's good to have somebody be like, 'It's okay guys. We have time.'"

Together, the academy class of 11 students went through extensive training. "I've become OSHA-10 certified, because of the program," Jamie said. "I'm CPR certified. We've learned about NCCER. We've learned a lot of basic work with tools and a lot of basic construction work."

Sometimes, though, the camaraderie shared with fellow students wasn't enough. That's when Jamie found that she could rely on her JMG teacher, Ms. Kash, and their EOL coordinator, Mr. Nap (a shortened version of his surname). They were, she said, "an amazing help through everything."

She gave an example: "We just recently built benches, because one of our job sites was canceled, and I wasn't entirely sure how to use one of the tools — and Mr. Nap basically instructed me on how to do it and had one of the other kids come over and show me how to use it.

So it was really cool, and then I got the hang of it." (Plus, she added, "I got to take a bench home.")

It is perhaps telling that Jamie listed her experiences as a young woman in a male-dominated profession as a lesson, not as a challenge. When asked to name one of those, she spoke of one faced by the entire class.

"One of our biggest challenges recently is with our job sites," she said. "They seem to be canceling a lot last minute, and we've all kind of gotten really frustrated with that. So we've kind of just made the most out of it. Like when they cancel, it will become like a classroom day, or we'll go out and we'll learn more about the tools, or we'll dig deeper into certain first aid things or we'll do an extra test. Like, when we built the benches, it was because one of our job sites had canceled, so we just decided, 'You know? Let's build benches instead. Let's get some hands-on learning in.'

Jamie's professional goal is clear, now. "I want to be a national park ranger, out in Oregon" she said. "I'm real excited for that." She needs at least two years of work in general construction or contracting to qualify. She was hoping to get hired at the academy's job fair. "I know last year two students from this academy actually got a job and they worked through their senior year," she said. "We have the same opportunity to do that."

The construction academy, she explained, was the very first step into construction.

"I'd recommend it for anyone that wants or thinks they want to do anything related to construction, within the field. I recommend it highly."

An ELO to build a future on

THE MAINE CONSTRUCTION ACADEMY PRE-APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM

The Maine Construction Academy is one of several summer programs offered by Brewer High School. Students who attend all six weeks earn a $1,200 stipend and money toward protective gear. During the program, they can earn their OSHA 10-hour certificate, construction first aid and CPR certification, a crane rigger and signal person credential, and complete the NCCER (National Center for Construction Education and Research) core curriculum. They are introduced to the carpentry, electrical and heavy equipment trades on site visits and with guest speakers. It all wraps up with a career fair where students could be hired by a local company or enter an apprentice program. The academy is managed by AGC Maine (Associated General Contractors of America).

Bronsyn | Working toward his future

Brewer High School, Penobscot County

The Maine Construction Academy Pre-Apprenticeship Program

Bronsyn, a rising senior at Brewer High, chose the Maine Construction Academy for a simple reason.

"I'd rather be working and making money than sitting in a classroom," he explained. He knew he wanted to become a linesman, and he knew the academy could help him start working sooner. "I heard about it through one of last year's students" Bronsyn recalled. "He said something about it, and I was like, 'That would be pretty cool. I don't have to come next year. I get to go work full time. I can go do whatever I want.'"

"It sounded pretty good."

It was. When interviewed in July, Bronsyn described the academy this way: "It's a good thing for people who want to work and they don't really enjoy school that much. It gets you the opportunity to see a whole bunch of things that you didn't get to see. It gives you job opportunities that you never thought you'd have. You interact with new people. You see different things."

Bronsyn knew he could focus well, and he'd always been "very hands on." The academy complemented those natural abilities with equipment and the know-how needed to safely use it over the long term. "We're now CPR certified," he said. "OSHA 10 is forever, and all the NCCER stuff, which is another program that we learned off of, that's forever too. They give us our power tools, basic construction stuff, harnesses, blueprints, stuff like that."

Which is not to say the program didn't require effort on his part. "The OSHA 10 was — it was long," Bronsyn recalled. "It's just two days of consistent sitting in the classroom doing nothing, just listening and bookwork. That was the hardest part."

Creating a resume and practicing the interview process was tough, too. "That's my hardest thing, is being able to actually talk to people," Bronsyn said. "And like coming up with everything to say, having questions to ask."

But Bronsyn found that whenever challenges arose, he could rely on his JMG teacher, Ms. Kash, and the ELO coordinator, Mr. Nap (a shortened version of his surname). "I mean, the people are great – Nap and Ms. Kash are awesome people," said Bronsyn. "They're great to work with. They'll help you a lot. They're very understanding. They basically know everything that you need to know. They know a lot of people that can give you a helping hand."

Referring to Mr. Nap, Bronsyn said, "He explained things in ways that other people don't explain it, and it makes it easier for us to understand. He kind of dumbs it down for us. Everybody talks about it at the higher standard, like really technical, and then he kind of just lowers it for us, so we're like, 'Oh, that makes a lot of sense.' That helps a lot."

Looking ahead, Bronsyn said he planned to work full time, graduate from high school, and then attend an out-of-state specialty school for a couple of months to become a linesman. He knows he'll be starting out ahead of others who haven't had the academy experience. The OSHA 10 certification alone taught him, "a lot of safety things that I did not know — all the little minor things that I had no idea about that I actually needed to know … It's a great program."
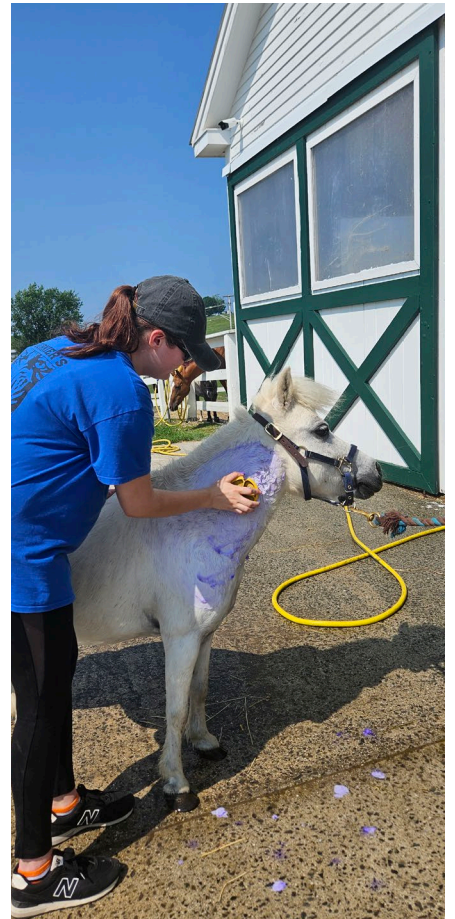
What Makes the MCE Approach Work Best

The two-year program evaluation revealed that certain elements of the MCE program approach made it work best. First, data and reflections from program-engaged young people, employers, and coordinators made it clear that the program coordinator role is a cornerstone of the program. In fact, the funded program coordinator was critical to the other successful program elements presented here. Therefore, this section begins by briefly detailing facets of the coordinator role that are essential to the program's success. Next, this section looks at four essential program aspects that make the MCE program approach work best: providing participants with strong and ongoing structures of support, the adaptability to different needs, providing compensation, and formalizing programming and pathways. The presented data include the conditions in which the presence or absence of the program elements affected program-engaged young people and employers.

> "
> I think the [coordinator] role is important in guiding young people on what it's like to be a part of the workforce and know what to expect from employers."
>
> **MCE-ENGAGED EMPLOYER**

Funded Program Coordinator Position

A designated program coordinator provides vital program structure and ongoing support to program participants and develops pathways to meaningful career exploration opportunities that match youth aspirations.

Strong and Ongoing Structures of Support

Program coordinators provide youth and employers a clear orientation to program expectations and responsibilities, and give program participants both initial and ongoing support.

Adaptability to Different Needs

Program coordinators are able to implement programming in ways that best fit the needs of the communities they serve, while still adhering to program requirements.

Providing Compensation

Compensating youth, particularly those from low-income families, increases equitable access to work experiences. Program-provided compensation also enables employers to participate, especially municipal/quasi-governmental organizations and non-profits.

Formalizing Programming and Pathways

Coordinators build relationships and grow collaborations with schools and community partners (Page 64) while MCE programming encourages collaboration across agencies and organizations (Page 65). Both lead to formalized programming and pathways and ensure career exploration opportunities continue.

Funded Program Coordinator Position

For young people, career exploration is about more than just a job today, it is about aspirations. Program coordinators are vital to helping youth identify their aspirations, and find meaningful opportunities with employers that match those aspirations. Program coordinators also support employers through the process of working with young people and having a good experience doing it. It is no wonder, therefore, that ELO or CBO program coordinators were the most positively highlighted program element throughout all written youth and employer survey responses. In fact, 83.4% of employers rated coordinator support as an important or extremely important factor for their participation in the MCE program. One employer shared, *"I would not have wanted to participate in the program without the support she provided!"*

>
> I just think that that's why this role as the coordinator and not like a classroom-based teacher is so crucial because it does take a lot of time and effort to make those relationships … an ELO coordinator has a lot of capacity to think bigger and broader and make and then maintain these relationships and learn about what is going on in the community.
>
> **ELO PROGRAM COORDINATOR**

While MCE program coordinators readily identified other school or organizational staff – like JMG coordinators, career specialists, community partner liaisons, or school administrators – who supported their role and this program, many of the successful program elements that are detailed in this report are directly related to the MCE program coordinator role.

First, while all school and community-based, youth-serving staff are dedicated to educating, supporting, and providing opportunities to young people, these staff do not have the time needed to facilitate a quality career exploration program.[20] The program coordinator role meant having a dedicated person to collaborate with these staff and work independently to develop new relationships in the local community. Program coordinators explained how much of their work involves working *"behind the scenes,"* and that there is *"a lot to coordinate besides students."* They discussed, therefore, how critical it is that the position affords them the time and capacity needed to do the work. As one CBO program coordinator explained, *"it takes a bit of a longer-term view of relationship building to create a positive fit for a youth and employer."*

The coordinator role also provided youth with a wider range of learning opportunities and greater levels of community involvement. Unlike other school or organizational staff, coordinators were able to tailor learning opportunities to align with individual student interests. This involved finding and sustaining the right partners for within school opportunities and with local businesses, non-profits, and municipal entities for outside of school opportunities. Furthermore, employers and coordinators both acknowledged that some industries are particularly hard to place young people in due to local availability or difficulty integrating youth into the workflow. Coordinators shared how their role gave them the ability to, *"figure out creative ways to set up opportunities, like ELO group settings, for those harder to place areas."* Additionally, coordinators' efforts to organize field trips, guest speakers, and curriculum enhancements positively affected the whole school community, including young people not formally engaged in the MCE program. Given all of this critical work, the MCE-funded program coordinator role has been the cornerstone supporting the expansion of career exploration in high schools and communities.

Strong and Ongoing Structures of Support

A successful extended learning opportunity or work experience is not built on good intentions alone – structure and clear expectations are necessary for young people and employers to achieve successful outcomes.[21] Evaluation data showed that the MCE approach worked best when program coordinators provided youth and employers a clear orientation to program guidelines, including expectations and responsibilities, and helped youth be accountable to these expectations and find success by providing ongoing support.

Youth described how coordinators provided support by helping them explore their aspirations and find the best "fit" within the program offerings. Young people also detailed that having consistent communication, including frequent check-ins, motivated them to complete the program, especially when challenges arose. For instance, an ELO-engaged participant shared, *"Consistent meetings and check-ins helped me stay on track and made sure I got my hours done and knew that if I needed help I had it,"* while a CBO-engaged youth said it was about *"having support no matter what."* Furthermore, because CBO programs were designed to serve young people facing complex challenges, coordinators and other program staff needed to provide various kinds of support to address participants' needs holistically. This included things like connecting young people with needed mental health and transportation resources, help with navigating the juvenile justice system, and communicating with an employer when a participant experienced a family-related or mental health crisis. One CBO coordinator described how helping youth navigate these situations *"when life gets in the way"* is what enabled them to engage in career exploration opportunities.

Nearly all employers who completed a survey described how coordinators were instrumental in recruiting them into the MCE program and ensuring their positive experience with it. Multiple respondents shared that they would not have known about the program had the coordinator not reached out and many described a thorough orientation to the program. For example, one employer shared, *"The coordinator went over what to expect as an employer and things to make sure we monitor (attendance, punctuality, willingness to learn, productivity, etc.)."* Employers highlighted that a decisive incentive for joining was the level of support coordinators said they would provide to young people throughout the experience. Coordinators themselves emphasized how these conversations were critical to effectively attracting employers, many of whom were hesitant to participate because they were short on capacity or facing other challenges related to the state's economy and its workforce. The initial program orientation proved crucial as it gave employers the information they needed to determine if and how they could engage in the program. Additionally, coordinators, especially those at CBOs, identified how these conversations helped them determine if an employer would be the right fit for their young person, specifically, and if

> " Something that helped me be successful within the program was learning how to make phone calls and send proper emails. Also just the support from my teacher and check ins regarding my goals was very helpful.
>
> **ELO-ENGAGED YOUTH**

> " [The Coordinator] was extremely helpful with setting up both students we had in an ELO. She communicated right from the start and helped make it a success. Both students are now hired as employees here.
>
> **MCE-ENGAGED EMPLOYER**

> " She asked a lot what we wanted to learn and that helped me stay focused.
>
> **CBO-ENGAGED YOUTH**

they were willing and able to work with youth that need more support.

In a few cases, surveyed youth and employers pinpointed instances where they did not receive sufficient initial or ongoing support. For example, an ELO-engaged youth shared, *"I think it's different for each ELO, but a little more structure would have helped more with business type things"* and another thought that *"having a way to track the work and all of the progress I made would have helped me, too."* Meanwhile, a handful of employers wrote about not receiving an orientation or support from a coordinator. While it was only a few cases, these employers did give lower ratings for their experience and for the impact of the program on Maine's workforce. One of these employers did express a positive outlook for future experiences when they wrote, *"I would not want to judge by just one experience. I would like to have the opportunity to host a student again. I myself could be more prepared and clearer on expectations with the student."* All in all, this small subset of employers and youth further demonstrate how strong initial and ongoing support from a coordinator make the approach work best.

Adaptability to Different Needs

Although the MCE programming had specific design and target population requirements, the guidelines left room for program coordinators to implement programming in ways that best fit the needs of the communities they serve. Evaluation data showed that having a program approach that was supported by structure but that could also adapt was critical to youth and employers' success. Specifically, the MCE approach worked best when coordinators tailored experiences to youth motivations, aspirations, and job readiness and when they were able to meet employers *"where they are at"* by creating different kinds of participation opportunities.

Coordinators worked closely with young people to develop opportunities that aligned with their interests and tapped into their motivation and aspirations. As noted previously, youth were generally drawn to the program because of the variety and choice these opportunities presented, and that MCE experiences

> I think what I've learned is that every employer is different and that our approach to whether it's a small business, a medium sized business or a large business has to be a little bit different. And that we really have to kind of customize how we work with individual employers to flush out what their needs are, and how that matches up with our particular student needs.
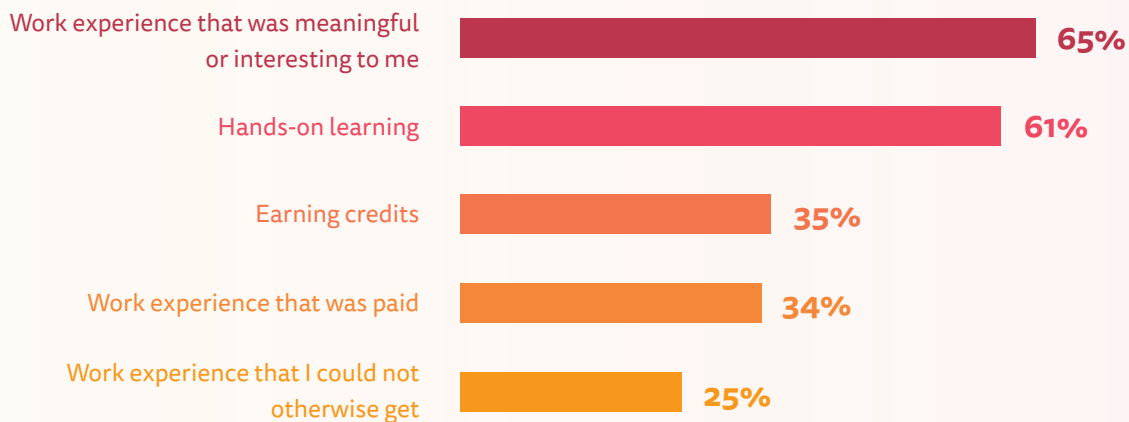
ELO-COORDINATOR

were often outside of the traditional classroom setting. Specifically, youth survey findings revealed that a highly motivating factor for their participation was having a meaningful or interesting work experience (65.4%), followed by hands-on learning (61.4%) (Figure 9). Somewhat less motivating was the opportunity to earn credits (34.6%), receive pay (34.3%), and have an experience that was not otherwise available to them (25.2%). Coordinators worked with each youth to develop opportunities that best matched these motivations and were responsive to their abilities and needs, such as needing an experience that included credit-attainment, compensation, or transportation.

While many career exploration opportunities paired one youth with a business or organization, coordinators also used multi-youth ELO groups and CBO cohorts to make career exploration accessible and relevant to more young people. Coordinators described developing and using group approaches for youth who were less prepared for a work experience or needed higher levels of support. They described arranging transportation for groups of youth to visit harder to reach businesses or access work experiences in hard-to-place industries. Youth who benefitted from a group or cohort approach were often under 18, faced social-emotional challenges, or lacked prior work experience.

CBO coordinators also spoke about designing individual-specific opportunities that enabled young people to grow their job-readiness skillset with intentional

FIGURE 9.

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

Work experience that was meaningful or interesting to me	**65%**
Hands-on learning	**61%**
Earning credits	**35%**
Work experience that was paid	**34%**
Work experience that I could not otherwise get	**25%**

supports in place and then ultimately persevere on their own. One coordinator shared the example of pairing a 17-year-old with a 21-year-old youth *"who's much more confident and can help bridge the gap between the younger employee and the staff."* Another detailed a case where, *"We set up a kind of a mentorship, internship program for him because he wasn't quite work ready, and that has really transformed who he is as a student. When I meet with him in follow up sessions, his confidence has grown, and things have really shifted for him."* Additionally, in the program's second year, two CBO coordinators were beginning to see another promising factor: connections with employers who had lived experience. They described this as meaning the employers had personal experiences themselves or in their family that made them uniquely positioned to understand and support systems-involved youth. As one of the two coordinators shared, *"they understand the work that we're doing with youth, and they want to help and feel connected to the program and youth outcomes."*

Coordinators also described some of the strategies they used to overcome ongoing challenges faced by Maine's employers that often make it difficult to place youth in desired work experiences. These challenges include being short-staffed, lacking the capacity to provide hands-on supervision or regular guidance, and facing barriers such as age or certification requirements for employment. Many program coordinators have found success by offering employers tiered levels of engagement (e.g., a one-day job shadow up to a

multi-week work experience). For example, one ELO coordinator described that offering local businesses different levels of participation, *"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."* Having a variety of levels of engagement created lower-stakes opportunities for employers to support young people and introduce them to their industry. It also meant that employers became connected to the program which may lead to longer-term opportunities in the future.

Lastly, coordinators described strategically pairing youth with employers who needed employees with certain skills or abilities. For example, placing a young person with a positive attitude and who is a quick learner in an experience that is public-facing and has customer service. Conversely, for employers able to provide longer-term experiences or more intensive supervision and mentoring, coordinators provided regular coaching and check-ins. This approach helped to maximize the benefit of the experience for both employers and youth while addressing issues like tardiness or challenges in the youth's personal life that affected their program participation. While coordinators shared that they still faced placement challenges like misaligned readiness between employers and program participants (one is ready and the other is not), all in all, the program's adaptability to work within economy-driven and individual-level obstacles enabled youth and employers to engage meaningfully in the program.

YOUTH PARTICIPANT PROFILE

Joe | Work experience builds know-how, provides community, fosters gratitude

UMaine Presque Isle, Aroostook County

Work Experience Placement: Atlantic Salmon for Northern Maine Inc. (Dug Brook Salmon Hatchery, Ashland)

Photo Prompt

A resource that helped you through the experience

When Joe, a student at UMaine Presque Isle, described his work experience at the Dug Brook Salmon Hatchery, he didn't use the word "I" much. He used the word "we."

"We got eggs back in, I believe, March," Joe said, explaining one of his pictures. "We have two fry tanks," he said, describing another. "We have two 'parr' tanks."

As Joe used his photos to show what he had learned about the life cycle of sea-run Atlantic salmon and the tasks necessary to support them, it became clear that his placement had landed him right where he belonged, much to his surprise.

"I heard about it through a university experience class for my first semester, and I decided to kind of take a risk and see what it was about," Joe recalled. "I didn't really have high expectations for the work just cause I —personally I want to go into fisheries — but I knew that the opportunities, up here at least, are a little bit limited." So, he was amazed when his professor helped him secure a long-term experience at a hatchery.

> The river's just really gorgeous. … Just the idea that we're doing something better for the environment and being able to see that river every day and the wildlife that was out there – it was very amazing.

Once there, he learned a series of regular chores that must be done to safely usher the fish along each stage of their life journey and assure the overall health of the hatchery. "We'd go in about two days a week for about two hours," he explained. "There'd be a lot of different things we had to do. We had to fill feeders, we had to feed the actual fish, we had to take temperatures, look for any dead fish." Clearing debris from a blanket filter that protects the hatchery's water source was one of the heaviest tasks. Picking out eggs affected by fungus was the most tedious. "There's really a lot of skill sets that I feel like I've learned," Joe shared.

A strength developed, a challenge overcome
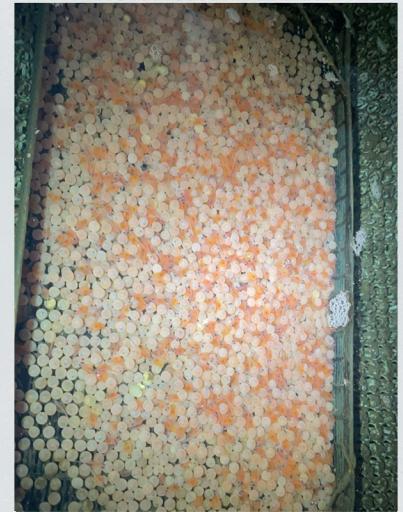
> The egg pickings are really kind of — it's not a very fun task. It's just meticulous and tedious work, but it's super important. … It's kind of, like, being able to see everything that's being done kind of makes it worth doing all that work for so long.

He also appreciated other kinds of lessons. "We were able to sit in on a membership meeting," Joe recalled. "It kind of helps to realize it's both the day-to-day stuff and the big picture stuff that helps get things done. Because you need that day-to-day maintenance, but also you need to apply for grants and funding — you have to arrange events and projects in order to kind of get people involved with it and raise awareness."

Joe said he thinks the Maine Career Exploration program can help participants pick the right career, by either reinforcing career goals they already have, or by teaching them about other opportunities they might not have considered. "I'd say it's kind of like interning for whatever kind of experience you want to learn more about, even if it's not necessarily related to what you want to do for work," he said. "I think people should definitely try it out.

Joe was able to secure a summer job when a valued ELO co-worker at Dug Brook vouched for him, and he's hopeful the experience he gained at the hatchery might lead to an internship at another hatchery next summer. "A lot of employers are looking for people who have actually been out in the field," he explained. Now, he's one of them.

But equally important for Joe are the friends he has made, finding home through his work opportunity. "It would be really cool to be able to continue volunteering at the hatchery and use whatever kind of work I learn from whatever job I have in the future to continue to help that hatchery," Joe said. "I think community is a pretty big value. I'm very grateful for the opportunity I've been given for that, and I really want to try to return the favor if I can, long term."

Providing Compensation

A foundational component of the MCE approach is to offer paid work experiences. Evidence from other work readiness programming has demonstrated that providing compensation increased equitable access to meaningful work experiences because pay acted as an equalizer for those who could not afford to dedicate unpaid time to career exploration.[22,23] Consistent with this research, the evaluation found that compensation played a crucial role in the effectiveness of the MCE program approach by incentivizing participation and supporting youth to start and complete work experiences. This was particularly important for two types of participants: CBO-engaged youth and employers.

Over two years of programming, half (48.8%) of surveyed CBO-engaged youth were motivated by pay to participate in the MCE program compared to only 28.5% of ELO-engaged youth. This significant difference can be attributed to the fact that CBO programs primarily serve low-income youth and 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 explained, *"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."*

Meanwhile, school-based ELO coordinators consistently expressed how credit-attainment, help with transportation (e.g., reimbursing for mileage or a program-funded bus), or having experiences outside of the classroom drove the majority of youth program participation rather than pay. For example, one ELO coordinator shared, *"I think when we entered this grant period, we anticipated that students would really be greatly incentivized by the money being attached to an experience. It's largely not what we found. It's not been a great motivator for students to embrace experiences."* Another ELO coordinator stated, *"Honestly, our kids are just happy to go one day a week out into the field and not be at school … I think that has been a bigger motivator."* That said, ELO coordinators recognized the divide between their students that needed a paid experience to support themselves and their family versus students that were, *"academic kids who have a little more support from home and can instead focus on a passion project or opportunity."* Additionally, there were multiple ELOs that did not provide program-funded compensation to youth for work experiences because they did not want to establish a component of the program they would not be able to sustain in the future without grant funding. Still, for ELOs that did offer pay, coordinators described how, *"it brings students who otherwise wouldn't be able to participate into the program."* Either way, CBO and ELO coordinators continued to describe how compensation incentivized students from all walks of life to invest their time in long-term career planning over the competitive or higher pay offered by some local job opportunities.

> " It is a challenge to bring employers to the table without some sort of wage reimbursement or stipend on our end. It's not the only factor, there are other factors, but it is certainly a big factor to bring employers to the table.
>
> **CBO COORDINATOR**

Compensation supplied by the MCE program acted as an even larger incentive for employers, and often is what enabled them to participate in the program. In fact, over the two years of programming, 66.7% employers that completed a survey said they would not have been able to participate in the program if they needed to compensate participants. Furthermore, when the business or organization type was incorporated into the analysis, 88.9% of municipal/quasi-governmental organizations responded that they would not be able to participate, compared to 61.1% of non-profits and 57.4% of for-profits. When asked to provide more information about this, many of the employers simply did not have the means to pay students because they were a small business or a 501(c)3 non-profit organization with a limited budget. Others detailed how they could not provide payment due to being a government agency, legal entity, or located in a school. For others, the career exploration experience was either a job shadow or a lower-level position and that additional training or certification would be required before they could pay an employee. Whether employers would be able to provide pay themselves or not, a common sentiment was that young people should be provided compensation if they are working. As one employer wrote, *"It's not real workforce development if you can't pay them."* Given all of this, it is clear that the program approach works best when compensation is available to facilitate bringing different types of employers and youth into the program. While compensation is not always needed, it creates a level playing field for those looking to participate.

Formalizing Programming and Pathways

Existing literature shows that career exploration programs, including extended learning opportunities, provide structure and help create or expand existing pathways that connect young people to careers and college.[24, 25] These opportunities include changes in high school coursework, including integrating job readiness content into curriculum and the ability to gain academic credit for career exploration; collaborations between high schools and with postsecondary education institutions; and partnerships with employers, community organizations, invested partners, and other types of youth development programming or resources.

Coordinators built relationships and grew collaborations with schools and community partners

Like the literature, year two focus groups revealed how coordinators' deepened relationships and collaborations with schools and community partners were leading to more formalized programming and pathways. First, ELO coordinators thought that, because school staff now *"better understood how ELOs fit into the bigger academic picture,"* it increased teachers' willingness to bring employers into the classroom for presentations and to develop credit-qualifying courses and activities. It also meant school administrators and departments were setting up and guiding youth through paths between their programs. One ELO coordinator shared, *"We're doing a better job of integrating with various departments internally and finding ways to augment curriculum … We're also working together with other departments like alternative education and special education to find creative solutions for students who may not fit the mold."* Second, some ELO coordinators spoke to the creation of regional collaborations involving other ELO or CBO grant recipients or high schools that did not have MCE-fund programming but have other resources to leverage. One detailed how,

"[Our] regional collaboration connects scholastics, the business community and the regional chamber [of commerce], Maine retailers, and Maine tourism … [they] all come to the table when we meet each time … I think that kind of collaboration really was born out of the vision of the grant, and I think it's given us a huge resource sharing advantage just in terms of whether that's equipment or ideas. I think that's directly a function of this funding."

Establishing processes and pathways for intra- and inter-school programming made it easier for youth to access learning experiences while also increasing their access to different types of workforce opportunities. In fact, some youth and coordinators pointed out that having opportunities available during school hours simplified scheduling, as it avoided conflicts with extracurricular activities or personal obligations.

For CBOs, coordinators also spoke to how the MCE program helped them to have a *"wider reach"* and expand access to programming and work experiences through formalized offerings. For example, one CBO coordinator described partnering with their local high school to bring their curriculum into the classroom which *"provide[d] kind of a value-added service to what they're already doing in the school setting. Our curriculum allows them to really expand offerings to the students and create additional opportunities that they wouldn't otherwise have."* CBO coordinators also explained how they have strategically linked MCE-funded activities with other workforce development programs and resources to expand opportunities and provide more comprehensive support to youth. For instance, one coordinator described co-enrolling youth in Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) programming. They shared, this *"ensures youth that are in our program are also fully co-enrolled in all of available WIOA services [which] means they've been able to provide things and pay for things for our students, like paying for drivers ed and helping to set up job training opportunities with some of their partners … and helps bolster the employer connections that we have."*

> I would say I've seen a big shift in teachers and support staff and admin with just their support of the program and their willingness and want to participate with career related activities. We do more than just ELOs. We really try to get teachers involved with field experiences and school wide events. Bringing in a lot of partnerships from the community. And we've just noticed a shift in the rigidity to being more flexible and wanting to do different things that involves the community, and no longer being afraid of bringing in someone new into their classroom.

ELO COORDINATOR

MCE programming encouraged collaboration across agencies and organizations

The above examples demonstrate that the MCE approach was most effective when program coordinators built thoughtful and intentional relationships with school staff and employers, which served as critical entry points for developing and maintaining meaningful experiences and led to the formalization of programming and opportunities. Yet, another element that made the approach work best was the development of new collaborations and supports between agencies and organizations.

The state of Maine's departments of Economic and Community Development, Education, and Labor as well as Jobs for Maine Graduates, Maine C3 Group, and The Rural Aspirations Project formed a community of support that provided vital collaborations and technical assistance in which to ground and expand program approaches. In year two, coordinators recognized that these entities have been critical to the success of the program and hoped even more can be done to support further collaboration, program expansion, and long-term sustainability. In particular, some coordinators thought career exploration programming would benefit from a coordinated employer outreach strategy, and from targeted, expanded marketing efforts. For example, one CBO coordinator spoke to how *"we're all*

doing this work…but kind of in a bubble. And because it's the same challenges we all face, there is likely a way from the state level down where we could collectivize what it means to work in a program like this." Another CBO coordinator explained how, if there were more pathways for coordinators to connect with one another about their programming and employer relationships, they could help each other find traction in specific industries. For example, having program-engaged employers help market career exploration programming to other employers in the same industry but in different parts of the state could be a worthwhile recruitment strategy. As one coordinator described it, *"connecting one [car] dealership with others in their circle could potentially create a rising tide that lifts all boats."* While the coordinator named a specific employment sector, the sentiment extends into other fields. These and other ideas could be further explored and actualized if programs had more opportunities to meet, connect, and strategize.

> I'm seeing, institutionally wide, that some of the new systems in place are having a really positive impact on not just our school, but other schools that are now interested, who are not a part of the ELO pilot.

ELO COORDINATOR

The Effect of Rurality

Maine is the most rural state in the United States, with 50% of its land area nearly uninhabited by residents. Further, 40% of Maine's total population lives in one of Maine's 11 rural counties.[26] Given this context, it is important to acknowledge the unique needs of Maine's population, and disparities between rural and urban citizens, especially through an economic lens. In response, one of the key goals of the Maine DOE ELO expansion project was to increase educational opportunities in rural Maine, specifically paid work experiences, work skill development, and workforce engagement for rurally located youth. Throughout the grant, a concerted effort was made to increase the presence of ELOs in rural areas, and results from the youth exit survey demonstrated that they were successful in these efforts: Rural areas were more likely to contain ELO sites (93%) than urban areas (62%) (p=0.000). Further, rural youth demonstrated greater engagement with the job search process, with 43% of survey participants reporting that they planned to look for a job, compared to 30% of those in an urban area (p=0.032). This was true regardless of whether youth participated in an ELO or CBO program.

Despite these growth areas and overwhelmingly positive feedback from youth engaged with the MCE program, evaluation data revealed notable differences between rurally and urban located youth. These differences highlight opportunities for the MCE program to adapt its future programming to better meet the needs of rural youth.

Motivation for participation

Analysis results showed differences in motivation for entering the program between urban and rural youth. Urban youth were slightly more likely to be motivated to participate in the MCE program by hands-on learning (66%) than rural youth (53%, p=0.021), as well as by receiving help with graduation or attaining a HiSET (9%) than rural youth (1%, p=0.004). When examining youth from 2022-2023 specifically, urban youth were also more motivated to participate by receiving help with graduation (30%, p=0.006) and earning a career certification (14%, p=0.012) than youth from rural areas (8% and 0%, respectively). These results suggest that rural youth may have other factors driving their motivation to participate in the MCE program that were not studied in this evaluation. A better understanding of these motivations could support rural youths' increased participation in future programming.

Access to longer work experiences

While there was no significant difference in paid versus unpaid work experiences between rurally and urban located youth, the length of the work experiences varied by location. When examining youth exit survey results from 2023-2024, youth in rural areas were more likely to have shorter work experiences (0-6 weeks, 65.3%) than those from urban areas (7+ weeks, 77.4%, p=0.000). In fact, the rurality of the participant's site accounted for nearly 22% of this variance in work experience length, and youth from rural areas were 15.5% more likely to have shorter work experiences.[‡‡‡] Ensuring that rural work sites have the capacity to offer more long-term experiences for youth may increase their overall engagement with the program and provide further future direction.

‡‡‡ A crosstabulation of the length of participants' work experiences by their rurality was used to understand whether there was a significant difference between urban and rural youth. Next, a logistic regression using the same two variables, demonstrated a significant negative relationship between the length of participant work experiences and measures of rurality, where rural participants tended towards shorter work experiences. The variance in participant experience was estimated using the Nagelkerke R Square value.

Positive program influence in some growth areas

Youth experienced growth in areas such as improved academic experiences, 21st Century job-readiness skills, and enhanced social-emotional skills, including confidence and motivation. However, youth from rural areas reported slightly lower positive program impacts compared to their urban counterparts. Specifically, a higher proportion of urban youth reported some or major change in their communication skills (94%), problem-solving skills (93%), and teamwork skills (88%) than those from rural areas (81%, 80% and 78%, respectively) The program evaluation could not determine whether the differences were due to specific program element or other factors, such as limited access to certain opportunities. Still, the findings suggest that expanded programming to support skill development in rural areas may help close this slight gap.

Effect on clarity and optimism about the future

Youth from all over Maine indicated that participating in the MCE program effected their future plans, but rural youth reported slightly less clarity and optimism around their future goals. A higher percentage of youth from urban areas reported some or major change in their understanding of their goals and aspirations (94%) than those from rural areas (77%, p=0.002). Urban youth also were more likely to report some or major change in their knowledge of career opportunities (92%) than those in rural areas (83%, p=0.018). Additionally, urban youth reported a slightly higher rate of agreement with the statement, *the program impacted my future plans*, at 87%, compared to 77% for rural youth (p=0.030).

Additionally, urban youth were more likely to agree that they felt optimistic about their future after participating in the program (98%) than those from rural areas (78%, p=0.000). These results are consistent with the literature, which suggests that rural youth often struggle with optimism and experience an array of social, health, and economic disparities which can exponentially effect feelings of hope.[27] Another factor that may influence these findings is the level of connection youth felt to adults who could help them with their career: youth from an urban area saw a 98% agreement rate that they had built these adult connections, while youth from rural areas came just short of this at 92% agreement (p=0.014). A review of the literature demonstrated that when youth are able to find natural mentors through their personal and professional social networks, feelings of optimism increase, and youth are more likely to pursue career opportunities.[28] Continuing to provide opportunities for youth to form connections with adult mentors who can help their career will only serve to close these gaps.

All in all,both urban and rural youth demonstrated strong growth through participation in the MCE program, and this growth is likely to become even more pronounced and equitable through continued program expansion and adaptation, especially in rural areas.

Ongoing Challenges & Considerations

The MCE program's ability to adapt to participant needs and proactively address issues helped mitigate implementation challenges at both the individual and community levels. Some of these challenges, however, fell outside of the program's control, like the impact of rurality on access to opportunities and the nature of Maine's labor market. This section explores how these broader issues and dynamics have affected and will continue to influence career exploration programs in Maine and offers insights to consider when looking ahead, including specific strategies employed by MCE program coordinators.

Transportation and geographical limitations

In year one, coordinators, youth participants, and MCE-engaged employers all identified a lack of reliable transportation as a major barrier to program access and/or that limited the quality of the learning experience. Socio-economic factors (e.g., not having access to a car, driver's license, or rides from parents due to cost of gas), were often the main drivers of transportation challenges, especially so in places where regional public transportation was inadequate. While transportation remained a challenge in year two of the program, some coordinators were able to implement continued or additional strategies to connect more youth with work experiences. This included arranging transportation for groups rather than individuals, working with districts to hire drivers or with schools to use buses to transport students to their work experiences, and using MCE funds to reimburse youth for mileage or to cover the cost of drivers' education. Covering the cost of drivers' education was a strategy ELO program coordinators and MCE-funded staff developed in year one as a direct response to rural transportation barriers. Still, transportation remained the insurmountable issue that limited if and where youth could have learning experiences because the challenges were both systemic and individual in nature. As one CBO coordinator explained,

> "I have kids that their parents don't even have cars, but they want to work … So, we're able to say we can give you some travel funds, 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 … it's really, really hard. So, trying to find them something in the towns that they live in is our best option. But that doesn't always work."

A few coordinators explained how they thought the MCE program would allow for equitable access to career exploration opportunities, yet came to realize that *"it's really the kids who have their own transportation that are able to do more."*

A transportation-related accessibility challenge that rurally located coordinators also pinpointed was a lack of available opportunities nearby. Much of this was due to businesses and industries not being equally distributed throughout Maine. For example, one ELO Coordinator explained, *"We are a very small district, very small community. We are limited in the number of and types of businesses we have that can take students."* While reliable transportation can help with this, another ELO Coordinator explain that sometimes even that is not enough. They shared, *"there's just not a lot of businesses close enough within an hour for kids to actually go do that … even if they have transportation, they can't drive to, you know, Bath Iron Works. That's an hour and 40 minutes away."* While geographic distance and the amount of businesses are factors that cannot be changed, program coordinators used creativity, strategy, and doggedness in order to place as many students in learning experiences as possible, despite these challenges.

Employer recruitment and field restrictions

In year one, CBO and ELO coordinators identified that recruiting employers for work experiences was a key challenge. This was due to many reasons, including employers lacking the bandwidth or skills for working with inexperienced or young workers, as well as difficulties finding placements in certain industries. This included automotive and other trade industries, social work, medical and legal fields as well as placements that required youth to be 18 years-old, have a drivers' license, or have a certification. For many coordinators, it was also difficult to find the "right fit" and create a meaningful experience if they did not have willing employers from industries that were interesting to the youth, or a good match for those seeking placements.

These challenges continued in year two, with coordinators sharing that some employers, *"don't feel they have the time to invest in the students in this current economy"* and that *"age and experience continue to be a limiting factor in many fields."* Multiple CBO and ELO coordinators described that several employers are willing to host a one-day job shadow or give a presentation to a class but *"don't seem to want the sustained engagement of having a kid come back."*

Likewise, some employers shared in written responses that their ability host a future work experience was dependent on having youth that were a *"good fit"* and already possessed all the skills needed to complete the job. Furthermore, coordinators in smaller communities also noted the *"added pressure of making sure the placement works … because people talk and we're a small town, and we can't afford to lose employers."*

Coordinators used a combination of ongoing and new strategies to provide extra support and training to mitigate some of these issues. For instance, coordinators increased general job-readiness and skill building activities ahead of work experiences, as well as field-specific training. A handful of coordinators described helping youth complete courses that earned them a certification in fields like behavioral health or real estate, in order to complete a work experience or to set them up to enter the career field at a higher level upon graduation.

Coordinators also talked about helping employers access pathways to remove age-related barriers. One particularly creative example provided during a focus group was from an ELO coordinator who shared, *"I've been encouraging and guiding employers through the actual Department of Labor Apprenticeship program. Once they become an apprenticeship site through the Department of Labor, kids can go there at 16 years old and that's one of the ways we've gotten around it."* Still, such pathways do not exist for many of the hard-to-place fields which impeded access to long term, more sustainable work site placements.

Additionally, coordinators spoke to the ongoing difficulty of not having partnerships with or ready access to certain employment opportunities that program youth sought, including in automotives, landscaping, information technology, and medicine. One CBO coordinator explained how timing can be an issue when a youth has a present but waning motivation to engage, and they had yet to build a connection or create a partnership with an employer in the desired field. They shared,

> *"It becomes really difficult when there's potential time pressure. And with our youth, in the way that we serve them, you know, if we have to wait a month, if we have to wait 2 months to get something set up? We're gonna lose them. I was literally talking to a one of our students yesterday who's like, I'm just gonna go get a job at that Dunkin Donuts cause they can walk into Dunkin Donuts, and they get hired on the spot … So, there's a lack of patience if something falls through or something doesn't happen."*

Certain businesses and industries will always have age, certification, or licensure requirements which will hinder employer recruitment and student placement in this kind of programming. Still, it was clear that program coordinators worked diligently to find or create meaningful pathways in the various fields their youth were interested in exploring and coordinators' efforts often resulted in additional and specific skill development.

Competitive or higher pay elsewhere

Related to the challenges of employer recruitment and field restrictions is competitive or higher pay at businesses that offer job experience but that do not necessarily align with career exploration goals or targeted skill development. Multiple program coordinators detailed how they had trouble recruiting youth to the MCE program because of not offering compensation to youth (outside of the JMG MCE Badge stipend) or that their program-supported compensation was considerably less than the hourly wages being offered by big box stores or franchises. For example, one ELO coordinator described, *"We have a different landscape out there right now … they're not giving up a $6 an hour job now. They are turning down a couple of hundred dollars a week for part time work."* Another ELO coordinator shared, *"The struggle I'm having is the kids who come to the table want the experience. But I know from speaking with a lot of my students that I'm losing kids to jobs at Walmart when Walmart's paying $17 an hour for a high school kid. They're gone, and a lot of them aren't willing to give up those hours because some of my experiences go into their Walmart schedule."*

One CBO coordinator shared a promising strategy they were using in response to these compensation differentials. Specifically, they were designing program opportunities so that youth could both work somewhere that offered higher wages and complete a meaningful career placement or other career readiness learning opportunity by fitting them around their work schedule. They shared,

> *"In the current economic climate where you can go and make $20 an hour … all of those places are familiar to our youth, whether it's fast food, or Walmart, or Target, or whatever. You know, so—there is that piece, and a lot of what we do is that education and try and really build those foundational principles in terms of understanding some of the differences between a job and a career. Oftentimes we'll split the difference and kind of do both and are like, okay, you want to keep working, cause you're making good money. But let's see if we can squeeze a career focused work experience in and around some of that time, as well, to try and build towards the future."*

The CBO coordinator went on to explain that their organization's overall youth engagement approach meant they continue to work with youth for many years of their early adulthood. This long-term view allows them to introduce the benefits of career preparation early on, planting seeds that can be revisited later when the young person is ready. They said, *"We don't always immediately see the fruits of that but oftentimes down the line, we have many youth who come back to us a year or more later and are like, I now want to do that thing that we talked about."*

For ELO programs that are high school based, it may be more difficult to work a career experience into a student's schedule if they are also in school full-time and working a part-time job. Furthermore, for many ELOs, their resources and programming did not extend past senior year, meaning their youth engagement period was shorter than community-based programs. Still, some ELO coordinators saw both how the pressures and opportunities of this economic moment could be leveraged. For example, one shared, *"With this economy, there are so many people who are looking for employees that I feel like they're willing to think outside of the box, and go to job fairs and talk to everyone and work with us to make [an experience] work."* Ultimately, while economic forces are outside of their control, the evaluation showed that program coordinators were strategic in developing various participation opportunities, often with compensation, that aligned with individual motivations. As a result, youth were compelled to engage in these opportunities, even if they paid less than at a big box store. These strategies should continue to be studied and explored to expand and extend their effect on career exploration programming in Maine.
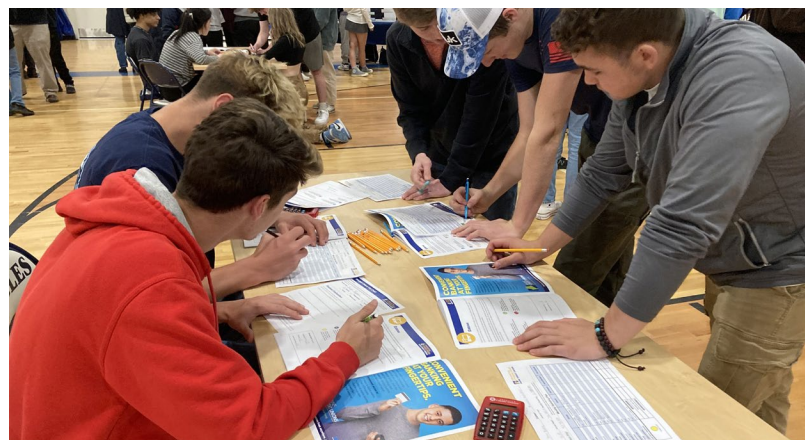
Conclusion: Evaluation Takeaways & Looking Forward

The evaluation of the Maine Career Exploration Program has demonstrated critical youth and employer outcomes. Youth engaged in the MCE program overwhelmingly reported positive experiences and changes in short- and long-term ways related to new skills, abilities, growth, connections, and optimism about the future. Their positive outcomes were mirrored among employers, who gained new and expanded connections with schools, community-based organizations, and Maine's next generation of employees, and who recognized how initiatives like the MCE program benefit Maine's workforce now and in the future. Further, the evaluation explored the extent to which the MCE program can be successful while contending with and mitigating individual and community levels challenges and how some challenges outside of the program's control effect the experiences and outcomes of certain youth. Specifically, that Maine's rurality creates ongoing transportation challenges and inequitable access to opportunities due to regional industry disparities.

These findings provide valuable lessons and important takeaways with implications that extend beyond the initial investment in the MCE program and offer insights that may benefit other community-level or state-wide career exploration initiatives. Indeed, many of the MCE programs (19 of 26) received an approved extension until 2026, and two of the seven that did not instead secured formalized funding through their school administrative unit (SAU) budget. In the coming years, the takeaways from the past two years can guide the extended programs as they continue to offer meaningful experiences to young people and employers. They may also help communities with programs that have ended to reengage and sustain key elements of the programming, while also supporting communities interested in launching new career exploration initiatives. In fact, in November of 2024, the Maine Department of Education sought applications from Maine SAUs and community-based organizations partnering with SAUs for the *Extended Learning Opportunities Expansion 2.0*. Ultimately, 10 schools and two CBOs were awarded state funding for either a new ELO program or an expansion of a current ELO program. The majority of these state grants will be used for ELO expansion in rural regions.

## A funded program coordinator is vital to success.

The intensive and consistent support from an MCE program coordinator helps ensure that program participants have a successful experience. Numerous examples showed how the program coordinator helped youth sustain motivation, 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. Moreover, their ability to develop and maintain deep relationships with employers enabled many employers to successfully engage in the program when they otherwise would not have been able to. Lastly, program coordinators played a vital role in creating and connecting youth to diverse, flexible, and individualized participant experiences. Their designated role allowed them the time and capacity to collaborate with employers and create meaningful opportunities that matched youths' aspirations. Indeed, sites choosing to extend the program planned to dedicate more funds to personnel infrastructure to support students and students' supplies and materials.

➡ **For funders and policymakers:** Funding for career exploration program coordinator positions in Maine high schools and community-based programs serving disconnected and under-represented youth should be prioritized. Additionally, supporting the formalization and growth of a coordinator support network by providing funding for training and educational opportunities is critical for the preparation of new coordinators. These efforts should also aid in the continued professional development of those currently in the program coordinator role.

Flexible and responsive programs yield positive impacts, especially for vulnerable youth.

MCE funding allows programs to implement creative programming and tailor experiences to youth motivations, aspirations, and job readiness that effectively engage participants who need more support or are less prepared for a work experience. Noteworthy examples included coordinators setting up group experiences to make opportunities available to more young people or using a cohort approach if youth needed peer support to be successful. These approaches were markedly beneficial for youth who were under 18, faced social-emotional challenges, or lacked prior work experience. Furthermore, CBO programs were particularly successful in connecting participants to other types of needed supports and services, including mental health services, which created holistic, supportive social-emotional and career-readiness environments.

➡ **For funders and policymakers:** Investing in meaningful career exploration opportunities through community-based organizations is an effective model for expanding opportunities for disadvantaged youth. Funding like the Children's Cabinet pilot project grant should continue and be prioritized with a continued emphasis on flexibility and less stringent guidelines which enable organizations to offer holistic programming in ways other existing workforce training programs cannot.

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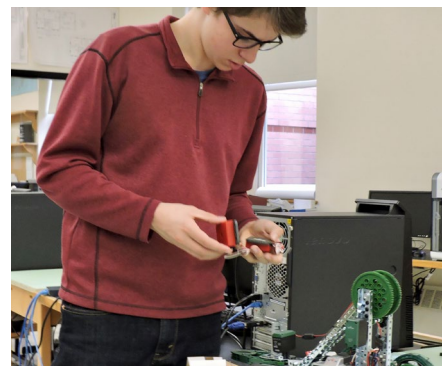
Relationship-building, flexibility, and ongoing support sustain employer engagement.

Ensuring that program coordinators have the time and resources to foster and support the employer experience will be essential to the future success of MCE programming. Employers play a critical role in MCE expansion and its ongoing success, yet many have limited bandwidth in a tight labor market. To overcome these challenges, program coordinators offered tiered levels of engagement (for example, one-day job shadows up to multi-week work experiences) and intensive support to structure, plan, and prepare for hosting the MCE work experience. Similarly, CBO coordinators found success building long-term relationships by engaging employers in the CBO's mission and playing a strong intermediary role to ensure a positive program experience.

➔ **For funders and policymakers:** Career exploration programming is not possible without Maine's employers. This evaluation makes it clear that employers successfully engaged in the MCE program because the program supports enabled them to offer opportunities to youth. Policymakers at the school district and state levels should prioritize the programming elements that facilitate employer participation. Specifically, it is crucial to maintain the program coordinator role and to fund program approaches that enable program staff to offer tiered levels of engagement tailored to employer needs. Additionally, exploring promising practices — like employer tax credits or subsidy incentives and aligning programs more closely with Maine's critical industry needs and growth sectors — should be considered and encouraged.

Compensation promotes equitable access to career exploration.

Compensation is also key to the success of career exploration programs, incentivizing participation and enabling youth to complete work experiences, notably youth in families with low income. Compensation through the programs also helps employers offer work experiences when they otherwise would not be able to provide paying opportunities to students. This is especially true for municipal/quasi-governmental organizations. Prioritizing, expanding and sustaining program-supported compensation for youth participants will ensure the MCE program can engage young people from a wider range of socio-economic backgrounds in opportunities that align with their career exploration goals.

➔ **For funders and policy makers:** While compensation increased equitable access to career exploration and was key for employer engagement, it is imperative that compensation is competitive with higher-paying local job opportunities that often lack longer-term career pathways. Otherwise, higher pay elsewhere will impede program engagement and compensation is rendered a less effective tool. Going forward, decision makers should continue to study and explore the effects of competitive pay in order to expand and extend its impact on career exploration opportunities in Maine.

Formalized programming and pathways help sustain and grow career exploration in Maine.

A critical factor to sustain and grow career exploration programs is to strengthen the connections between work experiences and educational ones, while also enhancing linkages to external career pathways and support systems. In year two, many program coordinators reported improved collaboration, the creation of regional partnerships to leverage available resources, and connections with programs like the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). Importantly, aside from the paid program coordinator role, none of these efforts required additional funding and they all enhanced the career exploration opportunities available to youth, especially for young people accessing programming through CBOs who are less likely to be engaged by the schools. In recognizing the synergy that comes out of multi-site collaborations, the Maine DOE awarded additional points to Extended Learning Opportunities Expansion 2.0 applicants that sought to take a regional or multi-site approach.

⮕ **For funders and policy makers:** Formalization extends beyond the individual school or community-based organization and needs to be looked at from a statewide perspective. Policy makers should work with JMG, Rural Aspirations Project, MCE-engaged school and community-based staff, employers, and other relevant stakeholders to formalize the essential ELO and CBO program elements. Diverse perspectives in these partnerships can support innovative ideas for how to overcome ongoing challenges like transportation and labor regulations. Additionally, strong intermediaries, like JMG, need to continue providing technical assistance to both existing and new programs. Articulating intentional yet flexible ELO and CBO program designs and ensuring financed infrastructure are critical next steps to scaling up high-quality career exploration experiences for Maine's youth and employers.

Appendix: Methods & Data Sources

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. DIP evaluators used Qualtrics, a web-based survey software, to design and deploy surveys. Starting in April 2023 and going through August 2024, DIP evaluators provided ELO and CBO coordinators with links to the online survey, which included informed consent language. In some cases, sites printed out paper copies of the survey and those were manually entered into Qualtrics by the program coordinator or by the research team. In a small percent of cases, certain questions were skipped or misinterpreted on the printed survey. Evaluators excluded these responses from analysis.

In year one, coordinators recruited youth that were graduating, completing their HiSET, or were otherwise ineligible to participate in the experience again in the future. In year two, coordinators recruited youth from these groups and expanded the recruitment to juniors. This recruitment approach was designed to limit duplicate responses across years one and two. While it is possible a youth may have taken the survey more than once, the research team took every possible effort to identify and remove duplicates from the analysis, and no known duplicates were included in the results. Datafiles were downloaded from Qualtrics and analyzed with Excel and SPSS v29. Across the two years, a total of 322 responses were submitted and included in the evaluation: 229 (72.7%) were ELO-engaged youth and 86 (27.3%) were youth engaged by a CBO.

MCE Employer Survey

At four separate times between June 2023 and August 2024, 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. An online form was used to collect the contact information, which included email address and phone number. DIP evaluators used Qualtrics, to deploy surveys and SPSS V29 to analyze the data. Across the two years, 345 different employers were invited to complete a survey, with 119 employers from 48 different Maine towns or cities completing a survey (34.5% response rate). There were no duplicate responses included in the analysis.

MCE Focus Groups with ELO and CBO Coordinators

All program coordinators were invited to attend one focus group in 2023 and one in 2024. Twenty of 26 ELO coordinators and six CBO participants engaged in at least one focus group across the two years. The majority of the program coordinators participated in a focus group each year. The focus group questions asked participants to reflect on program implementation successes and challenges, as well as their experience with program participants and the strategies they used to engage youth and employers. DIP evaluators transcribed focus group recordings and used NVivo 12 Pro software to code and analyze the findings for themes and trends

Photovoice – Youth Profiles

Photovoice is a participatory data methodology that has participants use photography and stories about their photos to identify and represent their experiences. Photovoice was used in this program evaluation to create profiles featuring youth participants engaged in the MCE program. The evaluation team worked with program coordinators to identify youth participants, gain youth and guardian informed consents, share supplies, and schedule interviews. Ahead of the interview, most youth were provided polaroid cameras to document their work experience. Several youth elected to use their cell phone to take photos instead. Then, an evaluator interviewed each youth and asked them a set of questions that led them to reflect on their experiences through the photos they took. Sixteen youth participated in the photovoice process over the two-year program evaluation.

Endnotes

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18   See note 4, Biddle & Mette, 2016.

19   See note 3, Ross et. al., 2020.

20   See note 6, Saenz et al., 2021.

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26   Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention. (2024c). Rural Health and Primary Care. Maine Department of Health and Human Services. https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/mecdc/public-health-systems/rhpc/rural-health.shtml

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A strength you've brought

A challenge you overcame

A skill you've learned

A new connection you have made

A resource that helped you