

Costs and Quality in Virtual/Hybrid Summer Youth Employment Programming

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Introduction

Summer jobs play a critical role in providing young people employment experiences and improving their career readiness (Modestino & Paulsen, 2019; Greene & Seefeldt, 2021). Since 2003, [Philadelphia Youth Network \(PYN\)](#), a Philadelphia-based non-profit organization, has provided young people summer employment opportunities through the [WorkReady](#) program.¹ In Spring 2020, as a result of the impact of COVID-19, PYN pivoted the WorkReady programming to include *virtual* (mostly synchronous) and *hybrid* (i.e., a mix of virtual and safe in-person) experiences to continue offering Philadelphia’s young people summer career readiness opportunities. PYN works with *providers* and *employers* that offer multiple options for programming, including WorkReady Summer experiences to young people. Organizations that serve as providers submit program plans and budgets to PYN to host a variety of career readiness experiences to meet the different needs of young people. In this partnership, the service provider is responsible for the experience of the young people and PYN is responsible for distributing the youth payments for WorkReady activities as they are completed. Youth payments may take the form of incentives or wages depending on the type and design of the program. For summer employment experiences, businesses, non-profits, and other organizations serve as hosts, and PYN functions as the employer of record that manages youth payment distribution to participating young people. This unique system of relationships allows for efficient use of resources to mitigate risk and manage data centrally, while maximizing opportunities for businesses to provide a diverse set of options for career learning and practice across many industries.

In June 2021, PYN engaged [Research for Action \(RFA\)](#) to conduct a six-month study of the virtual and hybrid WorkReady Summer experience. Through this partnership, RFA, in collaboration with PYN and its providers and employers, aims to: document *cost structures* of virtual and hybrid WorkReady Summer programming in 2021; examine *perceived differences in these cost structures* compared to in-person programming; define *high-quality* virtual and hybrid summer youth employment programming; and identify *resources needed* to implement virtual and hybrid programming. In this report, we define *cost structure* as “a grouping of categories of costs/resources.” Findings from this analysis present an exploratory view of how cost structures of WorkReady programming differ by programming format (virtual vs. hybrid vs. in-person).

Research Questions

We conducted a mixed methods study that drew upon a scan of literature on best practices and primary data collected through surveys, interviews, and focus groups to answer these research questions:

- What *cost structures* are associated with implementing virtual and hybrid summer youth employment programming?
 - How do these cost structures differ by virtual and hybrid programming?
 - For providers that converted previously in-person programming into virtual/hybrid, how do they perceive of the differences in cost structures of in-person or virtual/hybrid programming?
- What are elements of *high-quality* virtual and hybrid summer youth employment programming? What are best practices associated with virtual and hybrid summer youth employment programming?
- What are providers’ and employers’ perceptions of *resource and funding needs* for high-quality virtual or hybrid summer youth employment programming?

¹ While WorkReady programming focuses on more than just summer experiences, this project was focused exclusively on WorkReady Summer programming.

Cost Structures

- Virtual and hybrid programming share many—but not all—of the same categories of costs:
 - Cost categories for virtual programming included *personnel; equipment and materials; and rewards/reimbursements*.
 - Cost categories for hybrid programming were the same, with the addition of costs for in-person program components including *transportation, food, events/field trips, and physical space*.
- Providers indicated that personnel time was the largest category of cost for virtual/hybrid WorkReady programming and that staffing costs for virtual components should not be underestimated.
 - *Recruiting and onboarding young people* to WorkReady programming took extra time in virtual/hybrid programming formats.
 - *Planning and facilitating virtual instruction* were also labor intensive.
- When compared to in-person programming, virtual programming may be similarly costly.
 - Compared to in-person programming, virtual programming could save costs in areas such as food and transportation, but it also involved a new set of costs, such as costs to equip young people with technology necessary for remote programming and ship materials to young people's homes.

Quality

- Employers and providers echoed literature on promising practices when they reported that, to facilitate quality, virtual and hybrid youth employment programming should:
 - cater to young people's interests and focus on "real world" content;
 - leverage multiple modes of interaction to engage young people;
 - offer flexibility and some structure;
 - focus on relationship-building;
 - provide one-on-one supports;
 - assess and address technology needs;
 - develop a strong system for communication among young people, families, and staff; and
 - build in opportunities for young people to practice leadership and feel ownership.
- In addition, in discussing quality of programming, several employers and providers offering hybrid programming reported that there was real value in being able to host in-person activities.
- Literature also suggested that virtual employment programming should incorporate a focus on mental health and wellness checks. Research further suggested a set of principles and practices that youth employment programming should employ regardless of format. For example, programming should be culturally and linguistically responsive and tailor supports to student needs, including for young people in need of individualized learning supports.

Data Sources and Methods

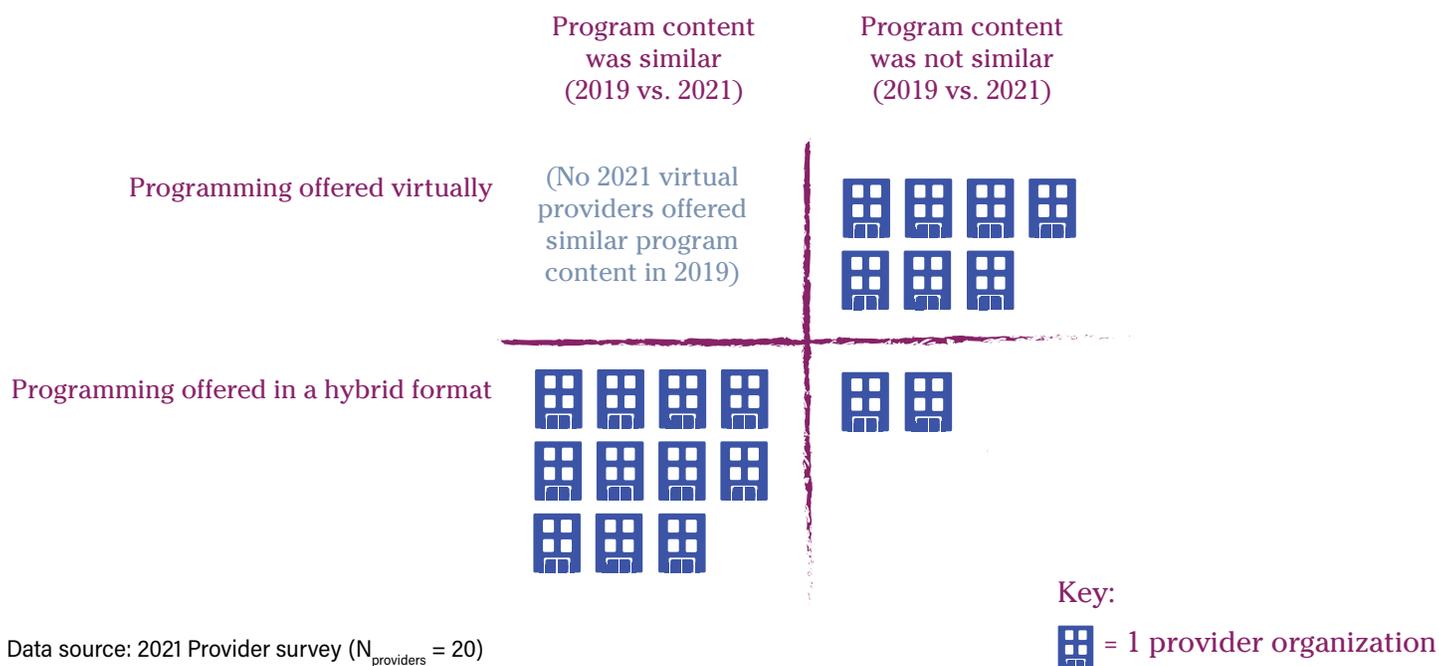
Data Sources

To study the cost structures and quality of virtual and hybrid WorkReady programming, RFA utilized a mix of primary data from focus groups, interviews, and both open- and close-ended survey items. We collected:

1. **survey responses** from 20² out of 76 virtual or hybrid providers;
2. **focus group** data from five virtual or hybrid providers (a total of 19 individual participants); and
3. **interview data** from nine employers, including virtual, hybrid, and in-person employers.³

WorkReady programming could change in two major ways from 2019 to 2021. First, programs in 2019 were offered in an in-person format. In 2021, only a few programs were offered entirely in-person⁴; most programs were either offered virtually or through a hybrid model of in-person and virtual formats. Second, program content⁵ was either similar in both years (for providers that offered programming in both 2019 and 2021) or changed over time. Figure 1 categorizes providers into four “types” based on the program format and content in 2021, based on survey responses (N=20 providers). The most salient group for comparing the cost structures of in-person programming to alternative program formats would be among programs that changed formats but offered similar program content in 2019 and 2021. Because no 2021 virtual-only programs also offered similar programs in-person in 2019, the cost structure comparison is most relevant for the 11 programs that offered hybrid programming of similar content.

Figure 1. Number of Summer 2021 WorkReady providers that responded to the survey, by program format and program content similarity compared to 2019, N=20 providers



² 21 providers participated in the survey but 20 providers answered questions beyond the first background information section.

³ We included some data from two interviewees with unique employer characteristics (one offering in-person employment in 2021; one internal to PYN).

⁴ For this analysis, we did not collect data from programs that were offered entirely in-person in 2021.

⁵ Program content here refers to the types of program components offered, such as career awareness workshops and matching young people with employment experiences. We asked providers if their 2021 WorkReady programming was adapted from in-person WorkReady programming in 2019, noting that adapted would mean “in Summer 2021, your program includes similar program components that were used in the Summer 2019 program, just with a different delivery format—virtual/hybrid. For example, whether in both years, your WorkReady program has included career awareness workshops, matching young people with employment experiences, etc.”

Based on providers' responses, our survey data covered diverse perspectives from providers that varied in these ways:

- arranging employment experiences externally or providing in-house career readiness experiences;
- working with different numbers of external employers;
- partnering with PYN for years or more recently;
- implementing different types of WorkReady Summer programs and providing different forms of career exposure activities to young people;
- being in different industry areas;
- serving different age groups of young people; and
- serving different numbers of young people.

Analytic Approach and Limitations

To accomplish the research goals, we conducted an exploratory analysis using focus group, interview, and survey data. We triangulated these data sources by comparing findings from analyses of data from focus groups, interviews, open-ended survey questions, and close-ended survey questions and elevating findings that were supported across data sources.

Additional details about methodology and study limitations are provided in Appendix A. As described in the appendix, our analysis has several limitations: first, this research used a non-random convenience sample for all data collection. As a result, findings from this research cannot be generalized to all WorkReady Summer providers/employers or other summer youth employment program providers/employers. Second, our survey sample includes a limited number of providers, which may result in missing perspectives from providers who did not participate in the survey. In addition, no provider in our survey sample offering virtual programming this year also offered similar programming in-person in 2019. In focus groups and on surveys, hybrid providers (and one virtual provider who offered somewhat different WorkReady programming in 2019) offered their reflections on components of programming that were more or less labor-intensive or costly when done virtually, as compared to when those particular components were done in person. Therefore, we had limited perspectives from providers who could make comparisons between in-person and virtual costs, with most of those comparisons coming from hybrid providers.

Finally, it should be noted that, in 2021, providers were still offering programming during the COVID-19 pandemic, and some of their experiences of virtual or hybrid programming may be specific to a pandemic environment (e.g., the purchase of personal protective equipment).

What cost structures are associated with implementing virtual and hybrid summer youth employment programming?

To better understand cost structures of virtual and hybrid youth employment programming, we conducted a literature scan and background interviews with PYN and provider staff. These sources, along with the data collected in this study, informed our categorization of cost items into four groups:

- 1) personnel
- 2) equipment and materials
- 3) rewards and reimbursements
- 4) other hybrid programming costs, including transportation, food, space, etc.

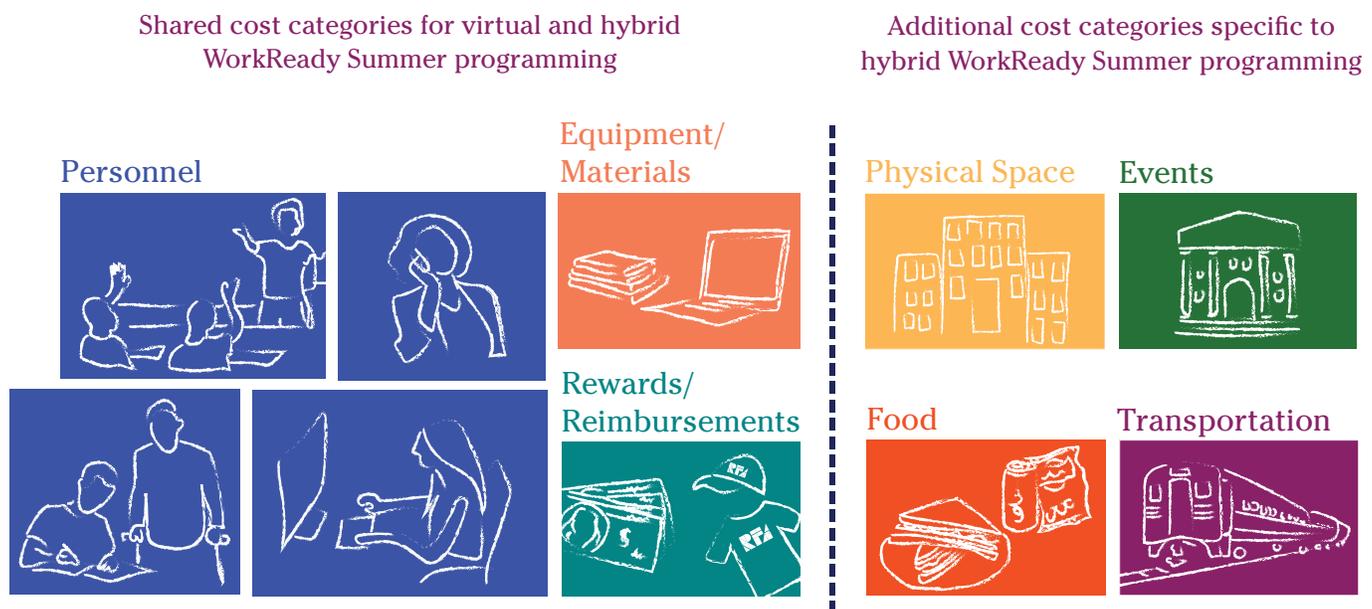
In this section, we present and compare cost structures by programming format. We then describe specific costs associated with implementation within each cost category.

Please note: We asked providers about categories of costs for their WorkReady Summer career readiness programming—programming that varied in design from provider to provider and could involve lessons, field trips, workshops, projects, and work experiences. We also gathered data from employers related to resources they needed to host WorkReady participants. In the section of the report devoted to cost structures, we generally focus on provider perspectives, though we also share employer perspectives where relevant. Our section on quality combines the perspectives of providers and employers.

How do these cost structures differ by virtual and hybrid programming?

Figure 2 below visualizes the cost structures required to implement virtual or hybrid WorkReady Summer programming in 2021, according to the provider surveys and focus groups. The image depicts shared categories of costs for virtual and hybrid programming, and categories of cost specific to hybrid programming. The fact that cost categories are depicted using a single box or multiple boxes relates to the extent to which respondents reported categories’ contribution to overall cost. Thus, the personnel category is depicted using multiple boxes, indicating that personnel time was the largest cost driver, regardless of format (see Personnel Costs section). In contrast, rewards/reimbursements were reported as more minor cost drivers for programs.

Figure 2: What categories of resources were required to run virtual/hybrid WorkReady Summer programming?



Data source: 2021 provider survey ($N_{\text{providers}} = 20$); provider focus groups ($N_{\text{group}} = 5$)

How to read this figure: This figure displays the cost structures associated with virtual programs and the additional costs associated with hybrid models which combine virtual and in-person programming. Each cost category (e.g., personnel or equipment and materials) is assigned a unique color in the figure. The personnel category in blue is depicted using multiple boxes to represent that virtual/hybrid providers perceived personnel time to be their largest category of cost.

As shown above, both virtual and hybrid programming require personnel resources, equipment and materials, and rewards or reimbursements for young people. In addition to these common cost categories, hybrid programming may still require resources to implement in-person components, such as the office spaces to host in-person workshops. However, more data would be needed to quantify precise cost differences associated with a programming format (e.g., hybrid programming) that includes additional cost categories when compared with virtual programming.

Recruiting and onboarding young people

Recruiting and onboarding young people to WorkReady Summer programming was labor intensive in virtual and hybrid programming formats. When asked why staff spent more time on recruiting and onboarding young people than they had during in-person programming, some providers described having to: 1) overcome barriers to young people’s interest in virtual experiences (i.e., Zoom fatigue); 2) market hybrid programming to young people and families, as the format was new and necessitated more work to clearly explain; and 3) help young people and families navigate online systems with few embedded supports. Specifically, providers reported that their staff spent more time to:

- provide tailored supports to young people, including to those who were less familiar with digital platforms and tools;
- offer extra help to young people in need of individualized learning supports; and
- provide technical assistance to students who had difficulty locating or completing some paperwork. Particularly, providers noted that troubleshooting technical issues with the enrollment system and process was challenging to do remotely.

Participants in one provider focus group reported that “as far as recruiting, it was a struggle, it was a lot harder than the years past” and that “these were kids who were just in virtual school this entire time [i.e. during the 2020-21 school year] and now they had to sign up for an internship in the summer, and they’re going to be all virtual again.” Programming with a virtual component proved difficult to “sell”—and particularly difficult to sell when recruitment itself was done virtually rather than in-person.

A participant in another provider focus group emphasized that onboarding young people remotely was very difficult:

“So, a big part of WorkReady is gathering all of their work, paperwork. Birth certificates, Social Security cards, IDs. Doing that virtually...well, doing it in-person is hard enough, trying to do it virtually, I think is almost impossible...We got it done, though, we got it done. I mean that’s definitely one of the most challenging things I’ve done this year...Because you know, your birth certificate: ‘I got it, here it is.’ ‘Okay, but I need you to send me that.’ How do you turn that piece of paper you have into a document that you can send me? Walking them through that. It’s just a lot of work.

Planning and facilitating instruction

Planning and facilitating virtual instruction are also labor-intensive activities in virtual and hybrid WorkReady programming. Specifically, providers named these activities that required significant time from personnel:

- adapting to virtual facilitation, which included learning new technology;
- preparing lessons, including visuals that would engage young people;
- teaching or facilitating virtually for long stretches of time and navigating Zoom fatigue; and
- reviewing and commenting on young people’s work.

Staff needed time to adjust to online facilitation and prepare materials for virtual facilitation. Online facilitation requires meticulous preparation, as it takes time to craft visuals, presentations, and activities that will engage young people remotely. As one participant in a provider focus group said,

“When we’re online, all of our workshops are PowerPoint or some version of that. So, it’s a lot of thinking of, how do you still make something like this engaging? So, we had to learn, how do you make PowerPoint attractive in all the different ways? How can we have group discussions?...We had to learn to use and adapt to make our workshops more engaging. And a lot of memes and bring like social media tools and really spending time to prepare all that beforehand. That was a lot of work and a very new thing for us when we went virtual.

A participant in another focus group noted that “especially within a virtual context” extra staff were needed to support young people and maintain safe staff to student ratios, while a participant in the same group agreed that virtual instruction necessitated robust staffing:

“I would also probably advise people to not underestimate the number of staff they’re going to need. I think that people might think that online time it takes ... for an online program, virtual program, it takes less staffing somehow, but actually it can be even more complicated. There’s different needs in terms of preparing. We can’t just make certain changes in a moment. You have to have certain visuals prepared...I think it would be easier to underbudget or underestimate time needed or other things like that. I also think there’s a certain wear and tear on staff in an odd way...And the online time is very wearing...I hear more about fatigue from staff when people are online than I do when we’re in-person doing all that work.

As this participant noted, adjustments to programming may be less feasible “on-the-fly” in a virtual world than they would be in-person, and staff also experienced significant screen fatigue after long days facilitating programming online. The participant suggested that programs may need to account for these issues in how they structure staff time and compensation, both of which have cost implications. Two participants also suggested that reviewing and commenting on young people’s work was labor-intensive virtually—for one participant, because accessing and commenting on work that students uploaded required more steps online than collecting and commenting on work in-person, and for another, because peer review of materials did not feel feasible in a virtual setting this year, leaving more work for facilitators.

Equipment and Materials Costs

Virtual and hybrid WorkReady programming uses a range of equipment and materials, including:

- software subscriptions and subscriptions of remote learning tools, such as Zoom, Google Classroom, etc.;
- laptops, electronics accessories, and devices such as Wi-Fi boosters, headphones, web cameras, flash drives, or scanners;
- curricula;
- program supplies such as learning toolkits, art kits, and office supplies;
- shipping for program supplies or other materials; and
- personal protective equipment (for hybrid programming).

A survey respondent noted that for them, costs for virtual components of WorkReady programming included access to a cloud storage service (e.g., Dropbox or Box). In a provider focus group, a participant reported “the Zoom monthly cost was something that we didn’t have before.” In another group, a participant stated that

“because we’re virtual, a significant portion of that [equipment and materials] category would be software subscriptions, platforms that students need to be able to access in order for them to fully participate...There are new licenses that we’re getting for each of those students as they’re participating.”

Devices were also an investment for some providers. In the words of one participant in a provider focus group,

“We always have to consider the fact that maybe [young people] don’t have devices to be able to get onto the Zoom meetings or to work in a virtual environment and things like that. So, we might need to buy equipment, more equipment than we would need in an in-person world because we probably provided it to them in our own offices [during in-person programming].”

In interviews, most employers noted that any equipment and materials used by young people already existed within the organization and indicated that few if any costs for new equipment and materials were incurred this summer.

Rewards and Reimbursements

Although not specific to virtual or hybrid programming, providers reported that rewards and reimbursements were another category of cost in their programming. These costs could include:

- rewards, incentives, or prizes for young people;
- reimbursements for background clearances for young people; and
- compensation for guest speakers or consultants.

Providers varied in whether they provided incentives or prizes to young people this year, beyond WorkReady stipends. Examples included “swag” such as backpacks, t-shirts, and water bottles. One provider mentioned that they wished they had been able to acknowledge the summer’s top-performing young people with some kind of reward.

Other Costs for Hybrid Programming

Given that hybrid programming involves some in-person activities with young people, it can incur a set of additional costs beyond those associated with virtual programming. These can include costs for:

- transportation;
- events/field trips (e.g., venue costs, admission costs);
- snacks and food, including for luncheons/events; and
- physical space.

These cost categories may not be present in a virtual-only cost structure. However, providers varied in additional supports or services offered to young people. To quantify precise cost differences associated with different programming formats (in-person, virtual, and hybrid), more implementation and cost data would be required.

In an interview, an employer offering hybrid programming reported that their organization provided food to young people participating in work experiences and also supplemented their transportation costs. On the survey, some hybrid providers (and one virtual provider) reported that physical facilities and office spaces were still required for their program. Though some program components were delivered online, providers reported that they still needed places to meet with staff and young people for in-person components. Spaces had to be large enough so that programming could adhere to COVID-19 safety protocols, and, in one case, had to be bigger than usual to accommodate the large number of young people that had been recruited.

Costs to Young People and their Families

In focus groups and interviews, providers and employers reported that young people and their families might bear some costs associated with WorkReady programming. Examples included costs for transportation; the printing of necessary materials; and internet access.⁷ There was variation in whether providers and employers relied on families to cover these costs or used WorkReady funding or other sources to cover them. There is a potential need to consider these costs in making funding decisions for WorkReady.

In a point related to costs for young people and their families, one employer also raised questions about wages for young people:

“Are we paying the interns fairly? Should they be getting more money for taking on these work experiences? We’re providing these opportunities to a lot of students who come from low-income backgrounds. Maybe we [can] increase the stipend amount, I’m not sure. To make it more meaningful, to make them really want to get up and go to work to make it worth it. We did have some students that had some difficulty committing to the internship. I don’t know. Maybe that would be a plus to increase the stipend, to give them more excitement to go into work because they’re being paid what they’re worth.”

How do providers perceive of the differences in cost structures between in-person and virtual/hybrid programming?

Hybrid and in-person programming may share the same categories of cost, while virtual programming—and virtual components of hybrid programming—may involve fewer cost categories and potentially some cost savings. However, when compared to in-person programming, virtual programming may be similarly costly.

In focus groups, providers noted that virtual programming may involve savings of costs related to *food, events, transportation, and supplies such as paper and glue*. However, they also indicated that virtual youth employment programming could cost just as much as other modes of programming, or at least that it could involve a new set of costs. A participant in one focus group reported that costs to ship materials to young people’s homes add up and that access to virtual programming via technology can rival costs for access to in-person programming (e.g., via transportation). In their words,

“*I would say virtual is obviously going to be less in costs in the areas of food and catering, the in-person event cost like food and that kind of thing. Maybe. However, I think if you’re doing virtual well, in order to keep people engaged, you’re adding costs. So, for us, one big thing that we didn’t have to worry about in 2019 was shipping costs.*

I will say this: we either pay for transportation or we pay for laptops. Right? No matter what, it’s access to the program and I think that’s a cost a lot of people didn’t understand...So if you’re doing a virtual program or hybrid or in person, I think a big thing is making sure that your students have access.

As described above, we also heard from providers who described personnel activities that were particularly labor intensive in virtual settings, which may mean that personnel costs could be comparable or even higher in virtual programming as compared with in-person programming.

⁷ One provider also noted that staff bore some costs for at-home internet access/electricity/computer use when facilitating virtual programming.

This foundational study defining WorkReady Summer cost structures could serve as a jumping off point for a future cost study that assigns comparable dollar amounts to costs/resources for purposes of quantifying precise cost differences between in-person, virtual, and hybrid programming.

Given our limited sample size of WorkReady Summer providers who converted in-person programming to virtual/ hybrid programming, more data would be needed to quantify precise cost differences among programming formats and assess whether those differences apply to all types of providers.

Quality

In this section, we present findings related to how providers and employers defined *high-quality* virtual or hybrid summer youth employment programming and any alignment between perceptions of providers and employers and best practices recommended in literature.

Findings from providers and employers

Employers and providers described characteristics of high-quality virtual or hybrid programming and best practices associated with such programming. They provided descriptions that aligned very closely with promising practices described in literature on virtual youth employment programming. Of course, many of these quality considerations are not unique to virtual programming and are applicable to in-person programming as well.

Employers and providers indicated that, to facilitate quality, virtual or hybrid youth employment programming should:

- cater to young people's interests and focus on "real world" content;
- leverage multiple modes of interaction to engage young people;
- offer flexibility with some structure;
- focus on relationship-building;
- provide one-on-one supports;
- assess and address technology needs;
- develop a strong system for communication among young people, families, and staff; and
- build in opportunities for young people to practice leadership and feel ownership.

In addition, in discussing quality of programming, several employers and providers offering hybrid programming reported that there was real value in being able to host in-person activities.

Cater to Young People's Interests and Focus on "Real World" Content

Providers and employers reported that high-quality summer youth employment programming caters to young people's interests. Employers emphasized the need to match positions to young people's interests and skills, while providers discussed the need to offer young people choices and solicit input from them. Input can be gathered through informal check-ins and through more formal evaluations. A few participants in provider focus groups mentioned the importance of making content "relatable" for young people; strategies included inviting speakers who share similarities to young people so that work aspirations resonate with them.

Providers and employers indicated that it was vital for programming to focus on learnings that would be useful in the real world. Shifting to virtual programming revealed a need to invest in young people's skills to navigate remote working environments. A provider noted that young people may not come to work placements with a knowledge of virtual workplace norms and may need support in that area, while an employer emphasized

that they felt their intern appreciated receiving “coaching about what’s appropriate or what’s not in an office setting.” Another provider spoke of the importance of teaching about technology (e.g., digital platforms and software) through the use of “high-tech” tools.

Providers and employers also reported that they felt it was critical to incorporate real-world lessons about financial literacy, career paths, and general workplace expectations into their WorkReady programming, and to encourage young people to strive for work they would be passionate about. A provider and an employer explained that they reflected on their own experiences as learners and as high school-aged students in order to develop their approaches to supporting young people, which included tapping into what interested young people and using real-world examples in the programming.

Leverage Multiple Modes of Interaction to Engage Young People

Providers emphasized that virtual programming must be interactive (not just lecture-based) and varied in format. Providers recommended “chang[ing] the modes of learning” regularly and offering multiple modes of interaction. They suggested including conversations (in which young people can ask questions and offer their opinions); videos and visual presentations; small groups in breakout rooms; and debates. Providers advised using online meeting platform tools, including chat, annotation, and polling functions, to facilitate opportunities for interaction.

One participant in a provider focus group emphasized that creating engaging graphics is labor intensive and can be facilitated by the use of specific design software, which comes at a cost. Another participant in the same group noted that it was challenging to compete with young people’s interest in looking at their phones during programming, and that it might help to have community agreements to facilitate young people’s engagement during WorkReady programming. Participants in two other provider focus groups indicated that young people should be encouraged to keep their cameras on when possible during virtual activities, and that formats such as small group meetings helped to ensure young people were visually present and engaged.

One provider spoke of bringing in an outside facilitator to share tips for youth engagement, given varying levels of staff expertise on the topic. An employer also noted that youth engagement can be facilitated through hands-on activities that allow young people to build something tangible.

Offer Flexibility with Some Structure

Providers and employers noted the need for flexibility in virtual or hybrid programming. One provider discussed the importance of acknowledging family demands on young people and being flexible about their participation. They also noted the importance of “de-briefing every single day...[so that] if something needs to change, it gets changed. I think just having that flexibility in structure and in curriculum is important.” In the words of another provider, “We can have all the structure in the world, but if you don’t know what the vibe of your group is, you lose teenagers.” One employer noted that hybrid programming gave young people some inherent flexibility around engaging with work in different ways (at home or in-person) on different days, while another felt that it was important to give young people choices around scheduling start and end times of their workdays.

Providers suggested incorporating frequent breaks into programming and modifying the structure or length of program sessions to be responsive to experiences of screen fatigue. One provider noted that their programming involved “really just listening to the community and what they need. We gave a lot of breaks... It’s very tailored to the young people and sort of like their fatigue levels, their screen time tolerance.” Another provider suggested “even giving [young people] time to find something in their house that represents a certain thing or like for 10 minutes, 20 minutes. So those things were really helpful because that helped them get out of the computer, do something in their house or interact with someone else...”

While multiple participants emphasized the critical nature of flexibility in programming, a few also spoke to the importance of clear goals and structure. One provider reported that “the thing that we found on virtual is you have to know what you’re doing every single minute of that day. You can’t have five minutes where you’re just like, ‘Oh wait, I’m not sure what we’re supposed to do.’” That meant that program planning took a great deal of forethought. Another provider underscored that “clear, defined goals” were key in ensuring that programming served as a steppingstone to help youth build work readiness.

Focus on Relationship-Building

Multiple providers and an employer noted that getting to know young people for the first time, observe their dynamics with one another, and facilitate positive peer relationships can be challenging in virtual settings. In the words of one provider, relationship building is

“a really big thing that is missing when you go virtual, because a lot of the friendship-building happens [at] transition times or when youth are...leaving [the] program and they’re...talking together. So that’s something that we’ve talked a lot about in terms of, how do we make up for this thing that is not available on virtual programming? And I think a lot of it is kind of encouraging them to have smaller interactions with each other and also like in smaller groups, because a lot of the times I think, in larger groups, it’s harder to engage for them.”

The use of small groups (through breakout rooms) can help facilitators get to know young people; foster relationships among them; and create safe and trusting spaces.

Host In-person Activities if Possible

Offering another strategy for relationship-building, an employer noted that in-person orientations are preferable to virtual ones for fostering personal connections between employers and young people. **In discussing quality of programming, several employers and providers offering hybrid programming indicated that having some in-person activities was valuable.** Meeting in-person allowed participants to share their personalities, connect with one another and with facilitators/mentors, and have the kinds of interactions that foster mutual understandings and that are harder to facilitate virtually. We heard that some in-person activities met with better attendance than virtual activities (which young people were sometimes “in and out” of sporadically).

Hosting in-person activities at the start of programming allowed one employer to meet interns and families, establish work expectations, ensure focus from participants, and help young people get comfortable with programming before sending them home with computers to complete work tasks. This employer and other participants expressed that due to the nature of their programming, *virtual-only* would not have been a workable model for them. For example, it would have been very difficult to orient one youth participant to work on tasks remotely, which required “in-the-same-room context and teaching.” Another employer noted that *only in-person* would interns be able to absorb some elements of workplace culture and expectations that might be helpful in their professional learning.

Provide One-on-One Supports

Providers and employers spoke of the importance of one-on-one, synchronous⁸ support for young people. In the words of one employer, “frequent check-ins between the supervisor and the young people are really useful in a high-quality program.” Providers and employers described the need for supervisors, mentors, and even academic advisors to check in regularly with young people, assess their needs and interests, scaffold their learning, and support the growth of foundational career-related skills.

⁸ A participant in a provider focus group also described several ways to support young people through asynchronous mediums but paired these modes with synchronous supports.

Assess and Address Technology Needs

Providers and employers emphasized the need to assess young people’s access (and skills) related to technology and to provide them with needed technology and technological support. A participant in a provider focus group noted that for participants “who didn’t have strong internet connection, it really impeded their ability to participate. So, [that was] another challenge that we had to tackle.” An employer agreed that although families of school-aged children theoretically have access to adequate connectivity, that did not always prove true, and they felt that “it should have been a lot smoother for children in accessing this technology.” Multiple participants reported that young people used their phones to participate in meetings or activities, which depending on the nature of the programming might not be an ideal scenario. As mentioned above, providers and employers spoke of providing young people with laptops, Wi-Fi boosters, and access to software, and one participant in a provider focus group reported that they administered a technology survey to young people to assess needs.

Develop a Strong System for Communication among Young People, Families, and Staff

Regular communication with young people was vital to the success of programming. For general communication among participating young people, one provider noted that group text messaging worked well. This provider and other research participants offered additional considerations related to communicating with young people and families, including suggestions to:

- **not rely solely on email communication.** In the words of one employer, there were “bumps in the road and the hiccups in terms of, you can’t just email [young people]. Sometimes you got to call them. You have to text them. You have to touch base multiple different times for them to understand that this is what’s expected, this is when the deadline is”;
- **use mass communication tools** (e.g., text subscription services, robocalling); and
- **leverage social media for recruitment.**

Additional considerations about families included that it was helpful to assess potential family concerns through an initial survey; that orienting families by Zoom worked well this summer;⁹ and that communicating with some families involved the need for translation and interpretation (which is labor intensive).

Build in Opportunities for Young People to Practice Leadership and Feel Ownership

A provider and an employer noted that, **although it can be difficult to do so in a virtual setting, programming should offer young people opportunities to practice leadership skills and showcase their expertise and abilities.** Young people should be able to “take ownership” of programming spaces, including by leading conversations, facilitating groups, and running workshops or presentations.

Findings from literature

In addition to asking interview and focus group participants about quality considerations and best practices in virtual or hybrid programming, we scanned relevant literature on *virtual* summer youth employment programming, and on youth employment programming generally.

⁹ Overall, perceptions were mixed about whether virtual orientations to WorkReady worked well, with some participants expressing that in-person orientations (e.g., orientations for interns to the details of their summer work) would better achieve some goals.

The results of our literature scan aligned very strongly with the considerations and practices mentioned by WorkReady research participants in discussing high-quality virtual programming. Literature suggested that virtual programs may *also* need to focus on social-emotional learning and offer mental health supports and wellness checks. It also indicated that youth employment programming, regardless of format, should:

- incorporate evidence-based design;
- have clear job descriptions and expectations;
- take place in physically and emotionally safe environments;
- involve project-based, applied learning;
- be culturally and linguistically responsive;
- assess young people's learning needs and tailor program/supports to those needs, including for young people in need of individualized learning supports;
- be partnership-based, forging connections to career networks and service providers to address young people's needs;
- engage young people in reflections/documentation of learning; and
- track young people's progress.

Recommendations: Resources Needed

Providers and employers offered direct reflections on resources needed to implement high-quality virtual or hybrid summer youth employment programming. Their perspectives on WorkReady cost structures and quality considerations also offered indications of necessary resources to support virtual and hybrid programming. Their insights suggested that high-quality virtual or hybrid summer youth employment programming requires:

- **resources to address additional costs of virtual or hybrid programming, including:**
 - personnel time to account for challenges of engaging and supporting young people virtually;
 - equipment and materials to access virtual programming; and
 - efficient and accessible systems for recruitment, enrollment, and payment of young people and robust supports from an intermediary around navigating these systems.
- **resources to ensure quality, including:**
 - systems to assess and address young people's technology needs;
 - capacity to implement programming that caters to young people's interests, involves multiple modes of interaction and engaging content, offers one-on-one supports for young people, and facilitates relationship-building; and
 - mechanisms to facilitate regular communication with young people and families.

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Appendix A. Methodology and Limitations

Protocol development and recruitment: A literature scan and background interviews with PYN and provider staff helped RFA to understand relevant cost structures and quality considerations and develop focus group, interview, and survey protocols. Protocols underwent an internal quality assurance process. RFA sent emails to a core set of providers incentivized by PYN to participate in the research, with invitations to participate in focus groups and complete surveys. PYN also circulated the survey to other providers and connected RFA to employers who might be able to accommodate interviews. As detailed above, RFA collected complete survey responses from 20 providers, interviewed nine employers, and conducted focus groups with 19 individuals across five providers.

Data analysis approaches: The qualitative data in this study included open-ended survey responses and participant data from interviews and focus groups. Our research team obtained transcriptions of interviews and focus groups, cleaned them, and combined them in analytic memos with open-ended survey responses. Data was then categorized and analyzed thematically; analysts developed findings based on frequently cited themes (Maxwell, 2013) and noted nuances in the data. After the completion of two stages of analytic memos, researchers triangulated findings with high-level themes uncovered in the analysis of close-ended survey questions. Close-ended survey question responses were downloaded from Qualtrics and analyzed as descriptive data given the limited sample size (N = 20).

Study limitations:

- **Non-random convenience sample** – this study used a convenience sample prioritizing providers who were incentivized to participate and employers identified by PYN.
- **Limited sample size** – this study had a limited sample size from each data source. Our results include diverse perspectives across a varied sample, but perspectives may be missing from providers and employers who did not share their experiences and perceptions through focus groups, interviews, or surveys. We were also not able to access descriptive data of providers who did not participate in the provider survey, such as type of programming they ran in 2021, number of young people they served, etc. Without such information, we were not able to examine to what extent the provider respondents who answered our survey were representative of other providers. Additionally, perspectives from providers who did not participate in the survey may provide critical information that would help us understand our research questions better.

In addition, no provider in our survey sample offering virtual programming this year also offered similar programming in-person in 2019. In focus groups and on surveys, hybrid providers (and one virtual provider who offered somewhat different WorkReady programming in 2019) provided their reflections on components of programming that were more or less labor-intensive or costly when done virtually, as compared to when those particular components were done in person. Therefore, we had limited perspectives from providers who could make comparisons between in-person and virtual costs, with most of those comparisons coming from hybrid providers.

- **More research and data are needed** to generate generalizable findings for all other providers and employers, as described in the body of the report.

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