

FINDING “FIT” WHEN CONNECTING YOUTH TO FUTURE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

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AUDIENCE

Informal Educators
Mentors, & Teaching Artists
Internship Program Managers or
College / Career Coordinators
Guidance Counselors Teachers

WHAT’S THE ISSUE?

A key aspect of brokering, or linking youth to future learning opportunities, is knowing whether an opportunity will be a “good fit.” Part of the assumption behind the notion of fit is that no opportunity is good in and of itself; it’s all about the interaction between the youth and the opportunity. Whether it’s a new program within your organization, a program in another informal organization, a fellowship, internship, or a job opportunity, we want to make sure young people will have a positive experience, one that’s challenging and interesting in a way that makes them more likely to actively learn and persist even if there are bumps in the road. This is especially important when youth come from communities that have been historically disinvested in and marginalized and where access to robust learning opportunities is more limited.

Being good at understanding potential fit is of course natural to being a good mentor and engaging in strong youth development practice. Good mentors always go through a process of thinking about who a young person is when recommending an opportunity.

For the purposes of this brief, we understand a “good fit” as an opportunity that:

- Involves activities that are relevant to and support growth in a youth’s interests, identities, and emerging areas of expertise;
- Provides an experience where a young person will be appropriately challenged;
- Represents a comfortable and safe environment for a young person.

CHALLENGES

- It takes time to get to know a young person well enough to know if something is a good fit.
- Some young persons are more explicit and vocal about their interests or display their expertise more clearly than others; in order to be equitable we have to get to know those that don't "signal" interest as strongly.
- Young people are often unsure about what they want or change their minds about what's interesting to them.
- Young people, even when we connect them to opportunities, might not show up (e.g. to an interview), or might relate to the opportunity differently than expected (e.g. spending scholarship money on non-academic things). We need to figure out how to be supportive even when these sorts of things happen.
- Educators and other adults are often more enthusiastic about an opportunity they see as a potential fit than youth themselves. We need to be prepared to deal with these differences in interest, and not get discouraged in the process, but rather ask questions about whether our assumptions are right, or if we're effectively framing for youth why we see an opportunity as right for them.
- Opportunities that are a good fit for a young person might not be available or you might not know about them.
- If we don't reflect carefully, it's possible to recreate our own cultural biases when recommending future opportunities.

ATTENDING TO EQUITY

Brokering new opportunities is a time-intensive process, so making sure an opportunity is a good fit means using limited time equitably in order to make sure that more youth have positive experiences. Non-dominant youth often have fewer institutional resources that might result in connections to robust learning opportunities. From an equity standpoint, a "bad fit," especially if it's to a substantive commitment like a semester-long program or a summer internship, can sometimes be high-stakes. A negative experience can turn off a young person to an emerging interest or be a hit to their confidence, and if that happens consistently, can result in a young person not finding a productive pathway that they go deep with and that leads to robust futures, and reproduce existing structural inequalities that come from under-representation of non-dominant groups in certain fields.

When considering fit for non-dominant youth, it's especially important to consider what kinds of barriers are distinctive to their lives. This might take the form of public transportation costs required for taking up an opportunity, conflicts with existing responsibilities like taking care of siblings, or parental concerns around where and when they're allowed to travel alone. Knowing about these can help a mentor to problem-solve in order to make an opportunity work.



APPROACHES TO CONSIDER

- **Get to know both youth and the opportunities you're connecting them to.** Surface information about a youth's interest, expertise, and identity, and do the same for the opportunity itself in terms of what interests and expertise levels it speaks to.
- **Involve youth in the process of deciding whether an opportunity is a good fit for them.** Research on youth initiated mentoring suggests that when youth are more involved in deciding with whom and where they want to engage, resulting relationships with people and institutions end up being more robust and durable:
 - ◇ Create contexts in an internship program where youth can interact with professionals or do shadow visits to multiple organizations to get to know them before they're matched. For example, Big Picture Learning creates "shadow days" where groups of youth visit a handful of local companies before they apply to internships.
 - ◇ Involve youth in contexts where they interact with and learn about youth or educators from another program or organization. For example, at Emoti-con, an annual youth media and technology festival in New York City, youth from multiple informal learning organizations mingle, hang out, and see presentations of each other's work, giving them greater understanding of other programs and organizations in which they might eventually choose to participate.
- **Leverage and create moments in existing programs where youth can signal their interest and expertise** so that educators who broker opportunities can make more informed connections. For example, DreamYard and the Parsons School of Design support youth to create learning portfolios where they can share projects and reflections on their creative works, and that then supports educators to understand more about their young people.
- **Create opportunities for youth to reflect on and make sense of their interactions with a learning experience that takes place outside your organization.** Even if a given fit isn't perfect, external reflection contexts can help youth both address issues they may be having during that experience and understand the experience in terms of their interests. This can be an informal check-in with a young person, or a more formal reflection space in a summer internship program. Spaces like these are especially important when an opportunity ends up being less than an ideal fit. In that case, a reflection context can be a jumping-off point for helping youth self-advocate, receive support, and make sense of what isn't working well.
- **Have educators in your organization build collective awareness of where good "next step" pathway destinations are** (other out-of-school programs, summer activities, workplace organizations) for youth generally that come out of your organization's programs. What are the opportunities that are likely a good fit for your youth, based on the kind of expertise and identities they develop in your programs? Consider making this explicit, whether a list or a database that gets maintained and updated.



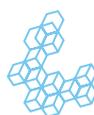
REFLECTION QUESTIONS

In terms of thinking about where a young person is at in order to consider if an opportunity is a good fit, we can ask ourselves questions like:

- What is the nature of a youth's interest in a certain area?
- What are their emerging identities (e.g., designer, scientist, activist, coder)?
- What kind of expertise do they have in terms of both technical and “soft” skills like communication and collaboration?

When we think about those things and how they relate to a potential opportunity we have in mind to connect a young person to, we can ask questions like:

- Is the opportunity one that has a strong youth-development orientation, and, if not, can that be ok given how mature a young person is and how able they are to self-advocate and drive their own learning?
- Do the people associated with a new opportunity have experience working with non-dominant youth?
- What level or expertise is required or expected for youth that participate in the opportunity?



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