

A SUCCESSFUL SUMMER STUDENT EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM

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INTRODUCTION

The evaluation of a summer student employment program is described. The nature of the program, its objectives, its benefits and costs and the methods used to evaluate the program are explained. The results demonstrate that the program has generated significant benefits, is considered to be a “sound investment” and may warrant adoption in communities without such a program.

Kahnawake, which is located just south of the island of Montreal, Quebec initiated a summer student employment program in 1973 with funding from DIAND. It has been offered continually since then. In its current form, the Kahnawake Summer Student Employment Program (KSSEP) provides summer employment for approximately 50 students. Prior to this study the students’ salaries were paid entirely by the program.

An evaluation of the program was undertaken to determine its effectiveness. Funding for the program had decreased and it was considered important to determine the value of the program and what may be done to improve it.

The team evaluating the program consisted of the full-time Coordinator of the summer stu-

dent program, his assistant who was on contract and working mainly on this research project and two University-based consultants who were familiar with the program, the community and research methodologies. The study was conducted in 2004. To assess the effectiveness of the program, data was gathered from the students that participated, the employers, previous participants, members of the community and a literature review was done.

THE SUMMER STUDENT EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM

The participants in the program are required to be full-time students, returning to school in the fall. They could be in high school, CEGEP (grades 12 and 13 in Quebec) University or Adult Education. The number of students in the program has varied, but has been approximately 50 in the last few years. There were 51 students in the 2004 program. The number of students as well as the employers has been limited by the funds available to pay the students’ salaries. There have consistently been more applicants than those who have been accepted, because of the funding limitations.

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The program is advertised in the local newspaper, on the radio station, by announcements in the local high school and by word of mouth. Given the history of the program, most of the people in the community are aware of it. The employers and the jobs they are proposing are reviewed by a Selection Committee who review and select the job placements best suited to the interest of the students. The students apply to the program and they are given access to the listing of summer positions. Not all employers or all jobs are deemed acceptable.

The students need to apply directly to the employer for the jobs that have been approved and are listed. The hiring process is that the employer and the student arrange to meet and interviews are conducted. The person who is hired is a function of the interview, with the employer making an offer of employment. The Coordinator does not influence the employers as to who is hired. The student has the option of accepting or not. As in the "real world" not everyone is hired.

The program offers additional flexibility in the identification and selection of employers. Students have the option of seeking out an employer who could offer an employment experience related to their chosen field of study and proposing that they apply to the KSSEP. However, this option is rarely used.

The length of the program is eight to ten weeks. The work hours per week are 37.5 hours and the pay rate is eight to ten dollars per hour. The pay rate varies with the education level of the student. One of the outcomes of the study is the recommendation that the pay rate also vary according to the type of job and the demands it places on the student. During the course of the summer workshops are provided, which the students are required to attend. These have varied, but tend to include issues related to creating cover letters, resumes, interviewing, professional conduct and career planning. Other workshops have been identified and are reviewed in the section on recommendations.

The employer is responsible for managing the summer students and feedback is supposed to be provided to the student as to his or her performance. The Coordinator of the program meets with the employer and the students during the course of employment to ensure that everything is progressing as it should.

METHODOLOGY

The objective of the summer student program "is to provide students with employment experience related to their chosen fields of study in an effort to prepare them for their future entry into the workforce." To assess how well this objective is being achieved, a study was undertaken and multiple sources of information were obtained. The students that participated in the program in the year in which the study was conducted (the study group) completed surveys before, during and after their summer employment. During their summer employment they also participated in one of four focus groups of approximately 12 students each.

In addition to the current students, employers were surveyed and interviewed, past student participants and community members were interviewed and a focus group consisting of staff members provided their suggestions as well as their feedback on the recommendations that were being considered.

There were 32 employers in the study group and 30 of them responded to the survey. Forty-two previous employers were also surveyed. Sixteen interviews were conducted with employers.

A random selection of 20 participants, from those that completed the 1999 summer student program and were no longer in school was made. They were either interviewed in person or if an e-mail address was found, they completed a questionnaire on-line.

Twenty others, who had participated between 1990 and 2002, were also interviewed. These were people who were known to have participated in the summer student program. They, therefore, were a non-random group.

Twenty-six community members, consisting mainly of organization directors and program coordinators working directly with youth were interviewed. A focus group meeting was held with members of the staff to obtain their views regarding the conclusions from the study.

RESULTS

Satisfaction

The participants, both current and previous, were very satisfied with the program and were virtually unanimous in their desire to repeat their involvement in the program, if it were possible

to do so. The employers were also satisfied with the program. All 30 of the current 32 employers that responded said they were satisfied. All, except one of the 42 employers of those participating in 2002 said they were satisfied and 40 of these 42 employers said they would consider participating the following year. The other two said they were unsure.

Skill Development

Those who were in the program for more than one year were asked whether they believed their skills in selected areas had improved as a result of their participation. Sixty-seven to eighty-three per cent, that is, from 12 to 15 of the 18 who responded to this question indicated that their skills improved considerably or a lot. The skills identified were in the following areas: communications, professional conduct, multi-tasking, time management, leadership, working alone, team work, and taking initiative.

There were four areas where the results were different. A total of only 5 to 9 out of the 18 indicated that their job search, career planning skills, filing skills and stress management improved considerably or a lot. The other possible answers were, "not applicable", "not at all", "minimum" or "moderately". The lack of positive response for these four areas provides greater credibility to the positive self-assessments for the eight skills that were perceived to have improved considerable or a lot.

Self-reported skill improvements may be subject to being challenged. However, given the differences in responses to different skill areas, it is safe to conclude that at a minimum those who participated in the program for more than one year believe that their skills in critical job related areas have improved significantly because of their involvement in the program.

Career Choice

Initial work experiences may have a significant impact on future career choices. This is important as one of the objectives of the program is to provide work experience related to their chosen fields. This is not always possible as the range of jobs available is limited. However, in a number of situations the experience that the students have during their summer employment may influence their future career choice. Fifty-five per

cent (55%, 11 of the 20) of the randomly selected participants in the 1999 summer student program said that their experience in the program influenced their decision in choosing a career.

Employment

Everyone that participated in the 1999 summer student employment program, with the exception of one person, is either employed or in school. This was as of October 2004. This compares with an employment rate of 45.3 per cent of the community's youth being employed, as reported in a study conducted in 2002. It is not possible to claim that the program is the casual event that accounts for the significant difference between the employment rates of those that participated in the program and those that did not.

The problem in attributing the extremely positive employment rate to the program is similar to claiming that a University education causes people to earn higher salaries. *Macleans* magazine (November 13, 2006) reports that Canadians with a University certificate, diploma or degree earned \$61,000 in 2000 compared with those with only high school, who earned, on average, \$36,000. Despite this difference it could be argued that it is not the University education (or participating in a summer student employment program) but rather a function of the competencies of those that go to University (or into the program) that may account for the difference.

Nonetheless, given the number of people that have participated, it seems reasonable to assume that the program (or University) has made a positive contribution to significantly higher employment rates.

Cost/Benefit

The cost of the program is relatively straightforward to calculate. The cost of the wages and benefits was \$3,300 per participant in the program. Additional costs could be attributed to the program. The most significant of these costs would be that for the administrators of the program. However, these costs, if included, should be prorated for the part of the year in which the administrators were involved with the program. This is because the Director for part of the year is involved in other activities.

The benefits of the program are far more difficult to determine. Those that participated in 1999 had almost full employment. The assumption made is that the program is the reason for the full employment. Different employment rates for Native youth have been reported. The 45.3 per cent employment rate in the community would be one rate that could be used to calculate the contribution of the program. A more conservative figure, which is a reported average employment rate of 68 per cent (or 32% unemployment rate) for Native youth was used. The costs of being unemployed to the individual, family and community can be tremendous. We used the annual savings of keeping someone off Social Assistance, which was \$6,600, as a conservative figure for our calculations.

Recently there have been about 50 participants in the program (51 in 2004). Using the 32 per cent unemployment figure (which was eliminated for those in the program) and the cost of Social Assistance of \$6,600, the direct benefit is \$115,600. This is determined by multiplying 50 (participants) by .32 (unemployment rate, which the program saved) by \$6,600 (Social Assistance not needing to be paid). That is $50 \times .32 \times \$6,600 = \$115,600$. The average time spent on Social Assistance is 5.5 years. Therefore the benefit would be the \$115,600 times 5.5 years, which equals \$635,800. When this is divided by the 50 jobs, the saving per job is \$12,718. This compares with the cost of the job, which is \$3,300. However, many of the participants are in the program for more than one year. To more accurately reflect the cost of those that participated, an average of two years per person could be used. This would result in a cost of \$6,600 per person (\$3,300 per year times 2 years, on average.)

In addition to this direct benefit, there is also the indirect benefit of the money spent by the students in the program, which is believed to have been spent predominately in the community. However, the most significant benefit is probably in the contribution made by enabling many of the youth to obtain practical work experience and related skills as well as helping them in their career choice and obtaining meaningful employment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations presented relate both to this program and for those considering starting a summer student employment program. They are based upon the results of this study.

Program Objectives

The objective of the program should be consistent with what the program may realistically be expected to achieve. It is recognized that the range of summer job opportunities is limited and that it may not be possible to provide a job consistent with a student's career aspirations. The existing objective is:

"To provide students with employment experiences related to their chosen fields of study in an effort to prepare them for their future entry into the work force."

The revised objective is:

"To provide students with the opportunity to pursue and secure employment and to develop life and employment skills that will support their educational pursuits, career plans and enhance their future employability."

Facilitate Communication

Providing students with more pre-employment support would be helpful, especially for the first-time program participants. Guidance on how to develop and submit cover letters and resumes and how to prepare for interviews are offered; however, few attend. Further emphasizing the importance of this would be useful. Encouraging greater communication between the employer and student at the outset, during their employment and at the conclusion of the work period would be beneficial.

Proactive Recruitment

Even though the program is seen as successful, it would be helpful to be more proactive in recruiting students and employers. The grade level where a specific effort should be made to recruit students is grade nine, as this has been identified as a pivotal grade for career development. Additional effort should be made to recruit

new employers who could offer job opportunities more in line with the career interests of the students. These potential employers should not be restricted to those within the community. The potential for obtaining additional funding to accommodate the additional employers and students should be considered before initiating such a strategy. If it is not possible to place additional students, because of lack of funding, then further recruitment would frustrate a larger number of employers and students.

Strengthen Alliances

It is recommended that closer contact be established with youth career counsellors in the schools and that job opportunities are better aligned with the career interests of the students. To obtain broader support and insights from the numerous stakeholders, a Board of Advisors should be created. This would include educators, employers, youth, funding agencies and the program director.

Workshops

Workshops are currently part of the program. Preparation type workshops for first time applicants would help them prepare for interviews and adjusting to a job. Other workshops have been identified that may be included, depending upon the needs and orientations of the participants. These include: navigating the Internet; introduction to entrepreneurship; leadership; public speaking; career explorations; interviewing and writing resumes and cover letters.

Funding

A major concern for most programs is where it will obtain the funding it needs. This is the case for the summer student employment program. One of the recommendations, based upon the interviews and surveys with the employers, was to raise their contributions from zero to twenty per cent, for employers in the private sector. A higher percentage of contribution could

be charged to the new employers, particularly employers that are profitable. Obtaining a 40 per cent contribution would not be unreasonable. The federal government has a summer student program in which it pays 50 per cent of the minimum wage rate to employers that are accepted into their program. A rationale for requiring employers to make a meaningful contribution is that if they need the employee, then getting a subsidy to hire a student should encourage the employer to do that. Further, if they are paying the salary or even part of it, they would manage the students more seriously.

CONCLUSION

The participants and employers of the summer student employment program in Kahnawake have been highly satisfied being part of the program. The participants have reported significant improvements in critical employment-related skills and an extremely high per cent of the students that were in the program have secured gainful employment. These are significant contributions.

The full value of the program is difficult to completely assess. Nonetheless, by calculating only the money saved by keeping people off of Social Assistance the payoff is close to four times the cost of the program on a per person, per job basis. It was calculated that \$12,178 was saved for each job, which cost \$6,600 over two years. However, the full value of the contributions of those who succeeded, in part because of gaining meaningful summer employment as a youth, goes far beyond the dollars saved.

This type of program may be able to make similar significant contributions in other communities. Given the success of the program in Kahnawake, it would seem reasonable to examine whether such a program would be viable elsewhere. Those seeking to help youth to develop critical work-related skills and to obtain meaningful employment experience are those who should examine this type of program for their community.