Erie County Summer Jobs and More Summer Youth Program Evaluation

by

Benjamin David Wilson

Bachelor of Arts, Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, 2012

Master of Arts, Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, 2015

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This dissertation was presented

by

Benjamin David Wilson

It was defended on

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and approved by

Dissertation Chair: Jill A. Perry, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Practice, Educational Foundations, Organizations, and Policy

Keith W. Trahan, **IISE Affiliate. Ph.D. alum.** Assistant Director, Collaborative for Evaluation and Assessment Capacity, University of Pittsburgh

Perry N. Wood, Ed.D., Executive Director, Erie County Revenue Gaming Authority

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Benjamin D, Wilson, Ed.D.

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Summer youth jobs programs are emerging throughout the United States. One of the challenges is successful implementation between program designers and program administrators. The essential function is to implement a successful program for youth, employers, and program administrators. This evaluation explores what tools the Summer Jobs and More (Summer JAM) staff uses to help youth maximize success in the program's goals and objectivities. The purpose of the program is to engage youth 16-21 years old, prepare youth for employment, and place them with an employer during the summer.

The purpose of this evaluation is to explore the work readiness training, a mandatory portion of the program, to see if skills learned in the work-readiness training transfer to the workplace. The Erie County Summer JAM Program has experienced issues related to attrition, and the goal of this research is to explore factors that may contribute to the problem.

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Preface

I dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my mother, Frances M. Wilson (1953–2011). Mom, you are truly my inspiration, and I will work hard every day to honor your spirit of life! Guess what, Mom! Who knew that someday I would make it to the Doctor of Education level? Thank you, Mom, for pushing me to be the person you always thought I could be. I am honored to have you as a mother. I also want to dedicate this book to and recognize my grandparents, Granville (1918–1988) and Novella (1924–1992) Wilson, who were true inspirations of love! Thank you for the love you shared for God and family!

I want to thank the Erie City Mission and WLD Ranch for helping my mom and me when we moved to Erie, Pennsylvania. Those early years were tough. Looking back, I appreciate the help and emphasis on education and hard work. The ranch and the mission will always remain close to my heart. Malcolm and Anna, thank you for all you did during times of uncertainty for my mom and me.

I want to thank my wife, Elizabeth (Lizz), and my two daughters, Abby and Ava, for sacrificing time with me so I could focus on school for the past three and a half years. Thank you, and I love you all! Lizz, I love you so much. The love I have for you is immeasurable. I'm glad we decided to raise a family together. Abby, you are such a smart and intelligent young lady, and Daddy loves you so much. You are a blessing to both your mom and me. Ava, your spirit fills the room, and Daddy loves you! I wish the best for both of you, and I am glad to call you my daughters.

Dr. Benjamin D. Wilson

<h1 style="text-align: center">1.0 Introduction</h1>

1.1 Broader Problem Area

The Greater Erie Community Action Committee (GECAC) administers programs throughout Erie County, Pennsylvania, to promote self-sufficiency. Since 2008, GECAC has had the opportunity to administer the Erie County Summer Jobs and More (JAM) Program through a grant awarded by the Erie County government. The Summer JAM Program is free for interested youths ages 16 through 24 who reside in Erie County. Those who join participate in a paid 180-hour summer (June–August) employment opportunity.

1.1.1 Summer JAM On-Ramp Training

To prepare youth for the program and to be employed and paid by the employers participating in the program, all youth selected are required to participate in on-ramp training before being placed with an employer. The purpose of the on-ramp training is to prepare students in work readiness before placing them on the job with an employer. The work readiness training focuses on soft skills, including working in teams, developing interpersonal skills, and building written and verbal communication skills. Soft skills often refer to a broad set of skills such as competencies, behaviors, attitudes, and personal qualities that enable people to navigate their environment effectively, work well with others, perform satisfactorily, and achieve their goals (Cappelli, 2015). After completing the training, the youth transition their employment assignments for the summer.

Though the program and training seem well designed, a problem area is the attrition rate of youth who do not complete the entire Summer JAM Program after being placed with their employers. Data demonstrate that these students tend to either quit their employment early or are terminated by the employer. Table 1 illustrates the youth attrition rate gathered from 2016–2020.

Table 1. Summer JAM Attrition Rate

	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016
Quit	7	14	8	4	4
Terminated	1	3	1	17	4

1.1.2 Programmatic Impact

The grant funds that support the Summer JAM Program allow for 150 youth to attend the on-ramp program. Upon completing the on-ramp program, youth are placed with employers during the third week of June with the expectation that they will complete 180 hours of work by mid-August. Each employer agrees to have enough work during the summer months for the youth to work approximately 25 to 30 hours per week.

Because of the crucial necessity to attend and participate in the on-ramp training, when youths do not complete the program, their slot should not be replaced by another youth because new students would not have had an opportunity to attend the initial on-ramp work readiness training. In addition, when a student is terminated or decides to leave the program, the employer does not have other students do the work they arranged. The Summer JAM budget results in an underexpenditure when students leave because GECAC cannot reallocate additional hours to another student.

In 2019, GECAC enrolled 154 youth in the program. Figure 1 indicates the 154 students enrolled in the program in 2019, noting that 48 students did not reach their 180-hour allotment, resulting in 31 percent of the students not completing the program. The students represented in

Figure 1 did not quit or get terminated, rather these students in 2019 did not reach their allotted

their full 180.

Hours Worked
06/17/19 -08/09/19
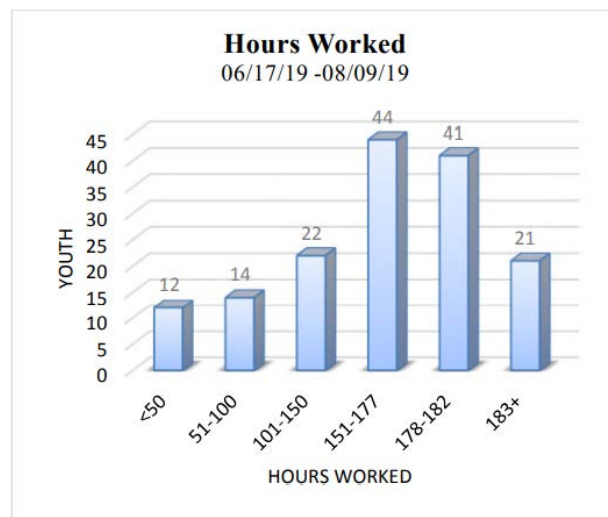
Figure 1. Hours Worked

As part of the funding requirements for The Summer JAM Program, GECAC is required

to hire an outside independent organization to review post-survey assessment results from

employers and students who are enrolled in the program. GECAC chose to hire KeyStone Research

Corporation to perform the required work. KeyStone Research Corporation is also required to use

the data collected to make recommendations to GECAC for program improvements. According

to KeyStone Research Corporation, 52 surveys were distributed, and 36 responses were collected.

Based on the survey results, KeyStone Research Corporation made three recommendations for the

program.

1. Involve employers and youth in program development, including soft skills training.

2.   Recruit additional and new employers, particularly for-profit employers.

3. Ensure continuity of program implementation year-to-year by creating a program

    manual and maintaining stable staffing to prevent organizational memory loss

    (KeyStone Research Corporation, 2019).

In addition, it should be noted that when a student is terminated from their position,

GECAC conducts an exit interview with the employer to determine why the employer decided to

terminate the student. The year 2019 employers generally assessed students ability to exhibit soft

skills as fair. Table 2 illustrates the results on a scale of 1–5, with 1 = poor, 2 = fair, 3 = good, 4

= excellent, and 5 = don't know (DK).

Table 2. Employer 2019 Survey Results

Skill	2019
Teamwork	2.87
Critical Thinking	2.53
Communication	2.75
Flexibility	2.88
Intrapersonal Skills	2.69
Positive Attitude	2.88

The attrition rate among students shows some problems that are causing the low rate of

accomplishment during 2019. An in-depth evaluation is necessary to determine contributing

factors that impact the attrition rate among students. In addition to the survey results from the

employer, students in the program were also given a survey. The survey questions focused on

how the students rank their ability to use the soft skills depicted in Table 3. The students were

asked to rank their ability to use these skills on a scale of 1–5, with 1 = poor, 2 = fair, 3 = good, 4

= excellent, and 5 = don't know (DK). Table 3 notes a gap between what students report and

what employers report. Although students believe they know the skills associated with soft skills,

employers indicate the opposite, a disconnect that may result in either students leaving the program or being terminated.

Table 3. Student 2019 Survey Results

Skill	2019
Time Management	4.43
Good Work Habits	4.55
Problem-Solving	4.39
Organizational Skills	4.35
Communication	4.50

1.1.3 Researcher's Role, Influence, and Positionality

During my time as the Division Manager for Workforce Development at GECAC, I was responsible for the oversight of the Summer JAM Program. I left GECAC for another opportunity in 2019. After I departed from GECAC, they asked me to be a member of the Board of Directors. GECAC recently renewed their contract to administer the program for another four years. In June 2021, GECAC permitted me to evaluate the program. As a current board member and because of my experience with the program and the nature of this project, GECAC asked me to conduct a deeper evaluation of the program's work readiness on-ramp training in the spring of 2021 to see what additional changes should be considered.

1.1.4 Objectives and Inquiry, Evaluation Questions

The purpose of this evaluation is to determine the contributing factors that led to youth attrition in the Summer JAM Program. I will focus on the work-readiness on-ramp program to determine if the soft skills curriculum that is part of the training is the root of the attrition problem. The following inquiry questions (IQ) will guide this evaluation:

IQ1: What are the top soft skills ranked by employers? How well do students exhibit those skills?

IQ 2: What are the top soft skills ranked by students, and what is their perspective on

learning skills associated with soft skills?

IQ3: What areas of soft-skills training need to be improved in the on-ramp work

readiness program?

1.1.5 Organizational System

Community Action Agencies were established under the Economic Opportunity Act of

1964 to help combat poverty in the United States. In response to this Act, the Greater Erie Anti-

Poverty Action Committee, later renamed the Greater Erie Community Action Committee, was

incorporated in March 1965 (GECAC, n.d.).

During President Lyndon B. Johnson's State of the Union Address in 1964, he stated that

the war on poverty consisted of three areas: equipping the poor to take advantage of the

opportunity to help themselves, providing work-study programs for high school and college

students, and offering work experience programs for unemployed young people. As a result,

Community Action Agencies emerged throughout the United States. Community Action

Agencies use state and federal grants to support their programs. Additionally, President

Johnson's approach to the development of Community Action Agencies allowed for grassroots

community activists in poor communities throughout the country to deliver innovative programs

aimed at eliminating poverty (Marris & Rein, 2018).

Located in Northwestern Pennsylvania, GECAC is Erie County's designated Community

Action Agency formed to provide advocacy and services directed toward eliminating poverty

and the causes of poverty in Erie County. According to the GECAC website, GECAC's mission

is to empower individuals and families to improve their quality of life by advancing

opportunities for education and training, employment, and living in decency. GECAC

administers a variety of community programs aimed at eliminating poverty and programs that

lead to self-sufficiency. The Summer JAM Program is one of many programs that GECAC

devised to meet its mission (GECAC, n.d.).

1.1.6 Background of the Sumer JAM Program

The Summer JAM Program was developed due to the significant increase in youth-related

violence in Erie County during the summer months. To counteract the uptick of youth violence

in Erie County, community leaders lobbied the Erie Community Foundation (ECF), the Erie

County government, and the Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority (ECGRA) to fund the

development of a summer youth employment program (GoErie, 2019). The result was a

partnership among these three funding sources to invest funding each summer for the

administration of what is now known as the Erie County Summer JAM Program. In 2017, the

Summer JAM Program experienced a competitive bidding process. As a result, the Erie County

government, ECGRA, and the Erie Community Foundation awarded GECAC administration of

the program. Before 2017, the program was administered by a nonprofit organization, Venango

Training Development Center. The program's first summer was 2013.

The program's primary objectives are to provide an opportunity for youth to explore careers

in their community and gain the necessary soft skills needed to get and keep a job. Youth

enrolled in the program can work multiple summers if they are between 16 and 21 years of age.

To meet these program objectives, all youth enrolled in the program participate in an on-ramp

training program before being placed with their employers.

1.1.7 Student Recruitment

Students are recruited from the Erie County region through local advertising and outreach to local school districts. Students living in Erie County are invited to participate in the program since it is an opportunity for them to gain experience in the workplace and start a valuable network of contacts. Students and parents are invited to informational sessions before the work readiness training week. During those informational sessions, which typically occur in mid to late April, students and parents can gain information and ask questions about the program. At the end of the informational sessions, attendees receive a registration packet that includes program timelines and all needed documentation needed for enrollment.

1.1.8 Worksite Characteristics

Upon completing the work readiness on-ramp training, youth get to pick the industry they would like to work in throughout the summer**.** The program collaborates with various employers who are willing to bring students into their organizations to support these choices. In 2019, the program enrolled more than 50 employers in the program. Figure 2 represents the 2019 worksite opportunities and demonstrates the broad range of fields where students can gain experience.
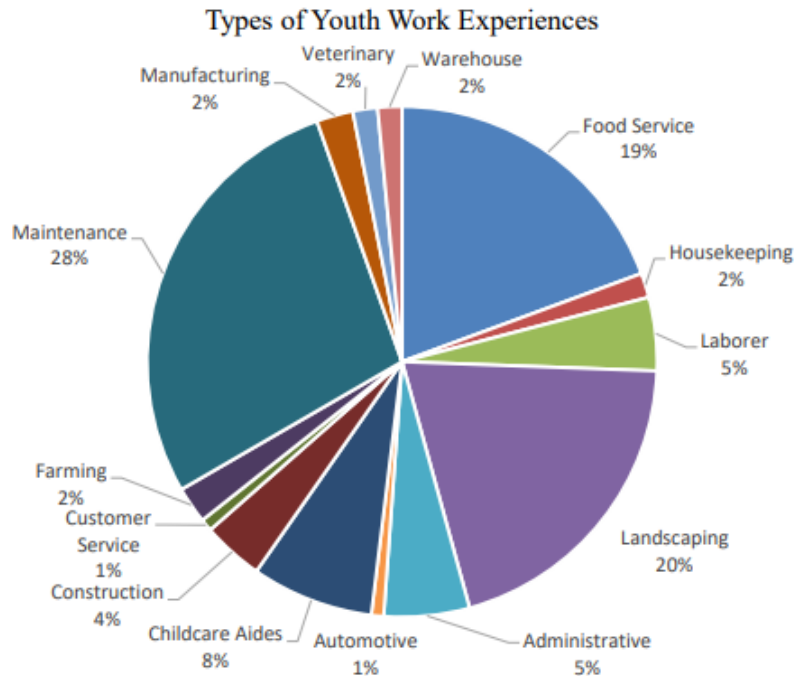
Figure 2. Student 2019 Survey Results

1.2 Stakeholder Analysis

The following section describes who the principal actors are in the Summer JAM Program. Every group has its own characteristics and mission, as described below.

1.2.1 Erie County Summer JAM Funders

Three organizations fund the Summer JAM Program. The Erie Community Foundation awards grants throughout the county to nonprofits for program development. The Erie County Gaming and Revenue Authority (ECGRA) administers community grants to local nonprofits using Erie County gaming industry revenue. Finally, the county government oversees county government and invests a portion of county funding in the Summer JAM Program. The role of the funders is to provide financial support for the entire program. The funders are responsible for reviewing the Summer JAM proposals every four years, providing the funding for the program and selecting the organization to administer the program.

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1.2.2 The Greater Erie Community Action Committee

In 2008, GECAC was awarded the contract to administer the Summer JAM Program. As the program administrator, GECAC uses the funding for student payroll, administers the work-readiness program, recruits employers, and hires the program's peer counselors. In addition, GECAC serves as the point of contact for parents, youth, and employers. Because GECAC has years of experience administering various community programs, it leverages its resources such as employers, youth, and adults enrolled in other programs that might benefit from enrolling and participating in the Summer JAM Program.

1.2.3 Erie County Employers

The employers must be in Erie County. They must have clearances (Act 33 and Act 34) and agree to have enough work for students to complete 180 hours during the summer. Because of child labor laws, students working with employers are limited to certain types of work (e.g., clerical, landscaping, and maintenance) and hours. Before enrolling students in the program, employers must participate in a training to review employer expectations and go over their qualifications for hosting a student. Employers are essential to the program because each employer adds value to the training and develops youth in their organization throughout the summer.

1.2.4 Peer Counselors

Peer counselors are employed by GECAC and support and mentor students in the program. The purpose of peer counselors is to guide and help students as they transition from the on-ramp training to employment. Peer counselors also serve as the point of contact for employers and students. Each peer counselor is assigned 35 to 40 students and five to 10 employers. If an employer has a question or problem with a student, the employer works with the peer counselor

to resolve the problem. Peer counselors support students by providing support to help youth throughout the summer. Additionally, peer counselors are responsible for delivering the work-readiness soft skills training during the on-ramp training.

1.2.5 Relationships among Stakeholders

The relationship between the Erie Community Foundation and ECGRA is to provide the necessary funding for the program. The Erie County government provides oversight, and GECAC delivers program services. Each year, GECAC presents a report to all funders, highlighting the number of students who complete the program. The report also includes data collected through surveys from all students and employers in the program. The program data is presented to the funders after the program. The evaluation report is used to help stakeholders improve program outcomes. The evaluation report also suggests that stakeholders convene at the conclusion of the program to discuss outcomes that need to be improved. If all stakeholders convene, the report suggests that there may be a holistic approach to identify and address issues in the program.

Students, peer counselors, and employers work together to make sure problems and questions are answered throughout the summer. Some students can pick what type of job they want. Employers can interview or "meet" the youth before the employment period begins. Employers are encouraged to work with each student to ensure they can do what the job entails.

1.2.6 Distribution of Power among Stakeholders

The Erie Community Foundation and ECGRA have developed measurable outcomes that GECAC agrees to produce. GECAC's role is to report the number of students enrolled in the

program, track the number of students who drop out of the program, and report on the overall administration of the programs to the funders at the conclusion of each summer program.

1.3 Problem Statement

Several studies examine summer programs designed to help youth gain summer employment opportunities. GECAC aspires to offer summer jobs through the Erie County Summer JAM Program. A signature characteristic of the program is the opportunity to develop soft skills and gain work experience. The program provides youth with an important opportunity to develop soft skills and gain work experience. However, internal data suggest various disconnects in the program that make it difficult for youth as they transition from the on-ramp week to their place of employment.

Since 2018, the program has experienced difficulty maintaining students in the program, due to problems associated with students' ability to transfer skills taught during the work readiness training to the constructs of their place of employment. The problem of practice that this evaluation will address is thus the disconnect between the soft skills on-ramp training and what the employer expects from the youth when they transition to their places of employment for the summer.

1.4 Review of Supporting Knowledge

Throughout the United States, many local communities administer summer employment programs for youth. These programs are one way to introduce youth to the workforce, reduce risky behaviors, and allow youth to make some money throughout the summer (Mervis, 2014). As more summer youth programs emerge throughout the country, it is essential to explore what research says about soft skills and the tools needed to reinforce soft skills among youth in programs such as the Summer JAM Program.

This section will present literature related to my evaluation's interest. The first topic will explore and explain the differences between soft and hard skills. The second topic will examine barriers that can impact soft skills for youth in the workplace. I will then conclude with research on tools that organizations can use when training soft skills and best practices to ensure those skills transfer to the worksite**.** I hope to gain insight that may help the attrition rate among students in the Summer JAM Program.

1.4.1 What Are Hard and Soft Skills, and Why Are They Important?

Hard skills are more restrictive in the work environment, which means there is a right and wrong way for the technical task. On the other hand, technical tasks (hard skills) are teachable and tangible and can be taught and acquired on the job (DeLong & Elbeck, 2018). An example of hard skills is the ability to turn on and operate a machine. Operating a machine can be taught while a person is on the job.

According to Ritter et al., (2018), soft skills are emotional intelligence skills such as communication and teamwork. These skills are in high demand, and students who possess such skills are in high demand among hiring managers. Lippman et al. (2015), suggest that key soft skills should include higher order thinking skills, social skills, communication, self-control, and a positive self-concept. As noted in Figure 3, the higher order of thinking consists of problem-solving and critical thinking, which is the ability for youth to make decisions expected by the employer while they are on the job. *Communication* is the ability to communicate using verbal and written skills. *Positive self-concept* refers to the ability to see themselves as important members of the organization. *Self-control* is the ability to regulate undesirable behaviors, and finally, *social skills* are behaviors associated with the ability to get along with others (Lippman et al., 2015).
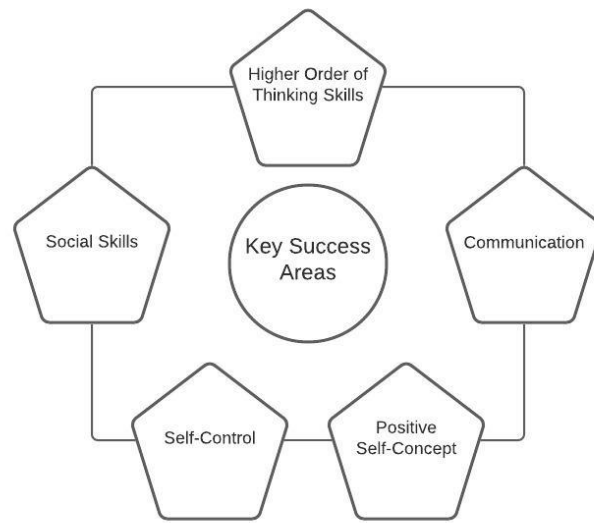
Figure 3. Graphic Representation of Key Success Areas

Today's employers strongly emphasize soft skills and consider a person's ability to have soft skills as key to employee success at the worksite (Sharma & Shekhawat, 2020). However, although many students assume they know what soft skills are and how they relate to their work environment, those who are new to employment may not know what soft skills are and why they are important (Majid et al., 2019). Furthermore, because of the wide variety of soft skills, skills are measured differently depending on the employer (Carol et al., 2020). In 2011, Human Resources (HR) managers reported that more than 600,000 jobs went unfilled due to a lack of soft skills (Cinque, 2016). Additionally, Brungardt (2011) suggests that students simply do not get soft skills in academics, and having an academic background does not mean students are proficient in soft skills.

Research has found that employers believe success begins with soft skills. For example, Orr et al. (2011) found that 61 percent of employers in their study ranked high soft skills such as

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good eye contact, good posture, favorable facial expressions, good gestures, positive attitude, being well-groomed, and dressing appropriately, and that those skills are lacking among young adult employees. To explore the importance of soft skills with employers and youth, Harvard University, the Carnegie Foundation, and Stanford Research Center surveyed employers and found that 85 percent of them believe job success comes from having well-developed soft and people skills, and only 15 percent believe job success comes from technical or hard skills, those skills associated with technical training received in school ("A Study of Engineering Education", 1918).

1.4.2 Long-Term Benefits

Robles (2012) found that 75 percent of long-term success on the job depends on whether a person can demonstrate soft skills, while 25 percent depends on their ability to incorporate technical skills. Moreover, Robles argues that there is a direct long-term advantage to students who possess soft skills early versus students who do not have such skills. Balcar (2016) found a positive and statistically significant effect on wages. The need for soft skills, especially for students who lack resources, play a significant role in wage returns. Students who are poor and lack soft skills are at more risk of seeing a gap in wage returns (Sum et al., 2011).

Heller (2014) examined 1,634 disadvantaged high school youth in the Chicago area who participated in a summer jobs training program. The program's goal was to teach students how to be successful employees and allow them to make connections to employer networks. Another primary goal of the program was to decrease crime among the youth in Chicago. When exploring what soft skills to train students, the program decided to focus on emotional management, conflict management, and information processing as the initial steps in soft skills training. Whether or not the students completed the soft skills training, students were still placed with

employers. The study found that 63 percent of the students who completed the work readiness completed the program, and among those students, 87 percent found permanent employment upon graduating from high school.

1.5 The Gap between Employers and Academia

Summer employment programs are important because work readiness training is not part of high school academics, which results in youth not being prepared for jobs upon graduation from high school or college. A study conducted by Human Resources managers found that employers require more multifaceted soft skills, which they define as communication, teamwork, and critical thinking, and rank high on the list (Orr et al., 2011). In a study conducted by the Bureau of National Affairs (2018), two employer concerns surfaced as key problems of maintaining good employees. First, employers revealed that new hires are not well-prepared to perform duties on the job, primarily because they are insufficiently prepared with soft skills. Second, the study indicated a gap between business and academia and that neither effectively collaborates to prepare students for employment.

Closing such a gap between academia and soft skills training has been an area of concern in high schools and among college educators who have faced pressure from employers to incorporate work readiness into the curriculum. For example, a report conducted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities found that more than 70 percent of employers wanted to see academic institutions take an active role in preparing students for soft skills (Ritter et al., 2018). When implementing soft skill programs in schools and colleges, Jack et al. (2020) suggested that employers need to be included so the program better aligns with employer expectations. Mohamad et al. (2017) noted that a role of schools and colleges should be to assess students' soft skills abilities in order to understand what more students need.

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In 1991, U.S. President George H. W. Bush presented a report, the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS), that supported the importance of soft skills, specifically among the youth population. A SCANS report called "What Work Requires of Schools" surveyed employers, unions, and business leaders, and found the most significant gap was between academia and employer expectations. As a result, SCANS formulated a plan for academia and employers. The plan focused on core interpersonal competencies (Figure 4) educators must consider incorporating into students' education. The SCANS report also suggested five levels of work-readiness proficiency that students need prior to graduating from high school. These "know-hows" are resources (writing and scheduling), intrapersonal (critical thinking), information (analyzation), systems (operation management), and technology (United States Department of Labor, 1991).
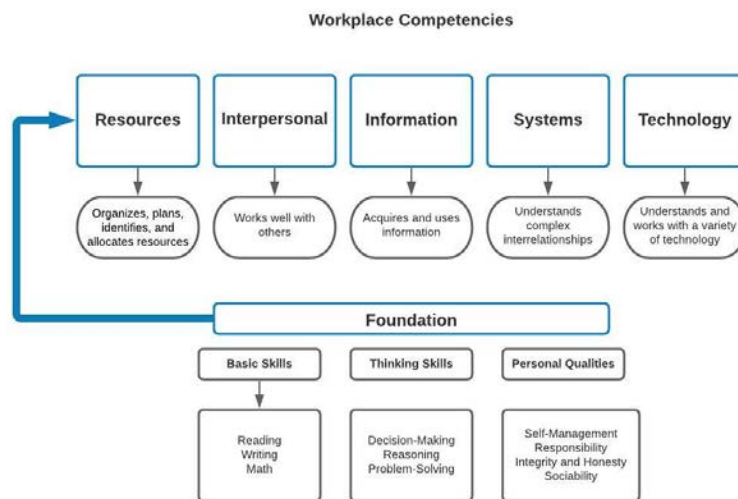
Figure 4. Graphic Representation of Key Success Areas

1.5.1 Access in School Districts

Far from collaborating in the development of soft skills in youth, schools in poor communities lack the necessary resources to promote this type of learning in those districts with diminished economic potentialities. In this sense, the research has shown that access to soft skill training in inner-city school districts is a problem. For example, Jeffrey and Jimenez (2021) found that poor school districts lack the funding to incorporate work readiness training for minorities. Such a lack of resources and access to employers disadvantage minority students when it comes to work readiness.

Equity and networking while in high school play an important role in students' futures. A study conducted by the Metropolitan Policy Program found that when schools incorporate programs and help students access work readiness programs, youth are more likely to have higher earnings nine years after graduation (Ross et al., 2020). Access to early skill development is a potential factor in giving minoritized students a stronger future.

1.6 Generational Difference

Generational differences between older workers and youth just entering the workforce play an important role in the success of youth work programs. For example, research has found that the age gap between Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y is often displayed through work expectations from one group, which frequently differs from the expectations of the other (Angeline, 2011). That is, what older generations expect from their employees can often be misunderstood or viewed differently by younger generations.

Warren Wright (2019), founder and chief executive officer (CEO) of Second Wave Learning and author of *Second-Wave Millennials: Tapping the Potential of America's Youth*, suggests that the problem younger workers entering the workforce face are the resentment of

older workers who expect young people entering the workforce to already have soft skills rather than soft skills being something that is taught on the job. Although older workers expect their younger colleagues to have soft skills before employment, the literature suggests that these skills are not frequently taught in formal school settings. Wright (2019) suggests that employers and older workers have to consider how to engage youth with frequent constructive feedback in order to help them develop these skills.

1.7 Training and Tools

Developing soft skills and ensuring skills are transferred is an important factor. In order to develop soft skills in youth entering the workforce, we must consider how students learn and develop these skills. To understand this learning process, Baldwin and Ford (1988) developed the Positive Transfer Model (Figure 5). The model focused on three areas: training inputs, training outputs, and conditions of training. Training inputs include the following:

- Trainee characteristics (age, interest, generation, and motivation)
- Design of the training (how to create an environment for learning)
- Work environment (how the work environment supports learning objectives)
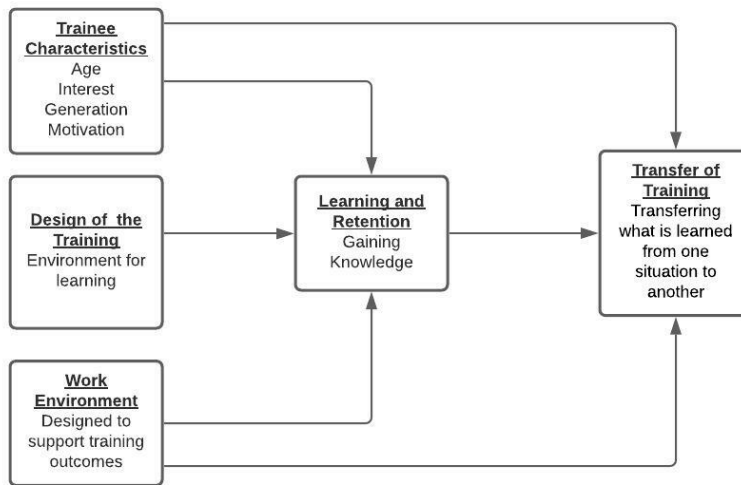
Figure 5. Graphic Representation of the Transfer of Training Model

Learning and retention are conditions that affect how students gain knowledge of training and transfer that knowledge to the job. It is how the trainer implements strategies to ensure training objects are transferred from one situation (classroom) to another (worksite).

To support the development of these skills, certain conditions have to support the students throughout the programs. These conditions are what retention strategies trainers are using to help support positive outcomes and what conditions are employed to ensure there is retention during the transfer from the training phase to the workplace.

1.7.1 Transfer Training Outputs

Learning, retention, and transfer of training are two key areas that Baldwin and Ford (1988) illustrate. Learning and retention refer to the student's ability to take what is learned in the classroom environment through modeling and making connections and know how those skills are displayed on the job. Transferring the training refers to the student's ability to take what is learned in the classroom and take it to their place of employment.

To achieve positive training outcomes, research suggests that trainers consider other theories of learning in order to promote learning, retention, and transfer of training. The Social Learning Theory and the Learning Pyramid, for example, may provide guidance to trainers on how best to teach students to develop soft skills. Both theories are described below.

1.7.2 Social Learning Theory

Bandura (McLeod, 2016) determined that youth learn by observation, imitation, modeling, and environment. He called his idea the Social Learning Theory (SLT). Bandura's approach to learning emphasized that youth learn from observing others, specifically youth who are their same age. Such learning includes imitating and modeling behaviors they observe. SLT also suggests that in order for youth to internalize the behaviors they learn, positive reinforcement is necessary. Bandura's work has been widely used in and out of schools to understand how youth learn.

1.7.3 Learning Pyramid

In the 1960s, the National Training Laboratories Institute introduced the Learning Pyramid (Figure 6). The model suggests that in order to improve retention and recall information that is taught, trainers need to consider the "cone of learning," which translates to only 5 percent of learning gained from lectures, 10 percent from reading, 20 percent from audio-visual, and 30 percent through demonstration. These five areas are passive, however, and do not actually lead to long-term learning and retention. To ensure long-term retention, the National Training Laboratories suggests that more time be spent on *active activities* such as discussion (50 percent), practice doing (75 percent), and teaching others in the peer group (90 percent). The author suggested that through discussion, practice, and teaching others, a higher retention and learning rate occurs among students (National Training Laboratories Institute, 1960).
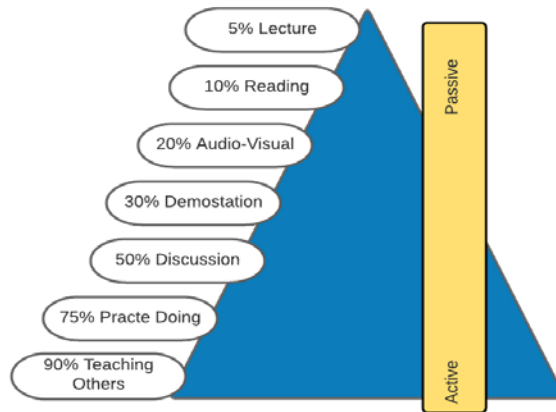
Figure 6. The Learning Pyramid Average Retention Rates

1.8 Summary

Employment outcomes weigh heavily on a skilled workforce with the ability to display soft skills. At the same time, job and employer expectations and demands require candidates to acquire more than just hard technical skills and possess soft skills. As a result, the value of soft skills has risen to become a leading requirement among employers. Therefore, the importance of soft skills among our future workforce is an essential tool we need to explore in order to ensure that youth understand the value of soft skills in the workplace.

The literature highlights the importance of soft skill development, which suggests that additional tools such as environmental conditions, and transfer training techniques. In addition, the literature suggests that using such tools and methods will increase stakeholder engagement and allow for program transparency in areas that will need more attention for further exploration and development.

2.0 Understanding the Problem and Seeing the System: An Evaluation

2.1 Research Design

The following section describes the post gathering methods I employed for this evaluation. Given that I am mainly interested in assessing the opinions and points of view of the main stakeholders participating in the Summer JAM Program, I used focus groups and document data analysis and the knowledge gained from the scholarly literature to conduct this evaluation. As the evaluator, my role was to conduct focus groups with employers and peer counselors, analyze program-related documents, and analyze all data in order to produce a comprehensive evaluation report.

However, as a previous director of the program, it was important for me to make sure the evaluation process did not have a bias on my part. To control any bias, transcriptions of data were shared with the participants to ensure the information I received was accurate. Additionally, I consulted with a counterpart connected to the Summer JAM Program who reviewed my evaluation report.

2.2 Site Selection

GECAC permitted me to conduct a focus group with Summer JAM Program staff, three peer counselors, the program director, and some employers. Additionally, GECAC allowed me to review documents and materials related to the program that were stored electronically on their website and in files at the main office. GECAC also allowed me to invite employers to the focus group I conducted with the Summer JAM staff. Because the program takes place throughout Erie County, these employers were located throughout and around Erie County.

2.3 Evaluation Logic Model

A first step to deeply understand the program as a system is to look at the Summer JAM Evaluation Logic Model. The purpose of an Evaluation Logic Model is to logically describe a program's resources, activities, outputs, outcomes, and impact. Moreover, the Evaluation Logic Model serves as a tool for evaluation because it can serve as a visual road map (W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2004) to understand the development and implementation of a program.

According to the W. K. Kellogg Foundation (2004), an Evaluation Logic Model is broken into four sections—*inputs, activities, outputs, and impact*. The Foundation defines the first three. Program inputs are resources such as funding, staff, equipment, community resources, and relationships that invest in the program. Program activities are defined as activities in the program such as the tools, processes, and techniques used in the program. Program outputs result from the activities, including the expected result of the activity associated with the tools, process, events, or techniques used.

The W. K. Kellogg Foundation (2004) refers to program inputs, activities, and outputs as assumptions or factors that could lead to impact. Impact, the last category of the model, results from the inputs, activities, and output. Impacts come in various time frames. The short-term impact is one to two months, the intermediate impact is one to two years, and the long-term impact is two to four years after the activities have occurred. In Appendix A is an Evaluation Logic Model for evaluating the Summer JAM Program.

Through planning and development of the Summer JAM Program, the Logic Model inputs, activities, and outputs are intended to provide a comprehensive approach to the program's intended short-term, immediate, and long-term outcomes. Existing program data suggest that a gap exists between the assumptions (inputs, activities, and outputs) and the impact of short-term,

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immediate, and long-term outcomes because 31 percent of the students are not completing 180 hours of employment throughout the summer. To better understand this problem, I collaboratively developed a program Logic Model with the program staff. Specifically, I focused on the inputs (student and employer survey data and employers) and associated activities in order to better understand the gap. My aim was to demonstrate if any additional inputs or activities required adjustments or additions to better support the students as they transition from the work readiness on-ramp training to their assigned places of employment.

2.4 Data Security

All data relating to the evaluation was stored in my secured password-protected University of Pittsburgh Student Cloud account. The University's cloud-based storage is sanctioned by the university. Only data that meets HIPPA de-identification standards are permitted to be stored on the platform. Employer and peer counselors were given identifier codes in the transcription to protect identities.

To ensure that I was aware of data security and privacy standards related to the Health Insurance Portability and Accounting Act of 1996 (HIPPA), in 2018, I received my certifications through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative Program (CITI) that tests for competency, rights, and obligations for protected information. The CITI certification is a requirement of the University of Pittsburgh to ensure that all students are trained in research

ethics. Additionally, my work in the EdD program at the University of Pittsburgh has prepared me for data collection and protection.

2.5 Data Collection

2.5.1 Focus Group Recruitment

GECAC agreed to allow me to recruit their Summer JAM Staff to participate in the focus group sessions for the evaluation. The staff include, one Program Director, one Peer Counselor, and one program manager. The purpose of using the program staff to participate in the focus group was to see if any themes or gaps through our conversation that could be used during analysis. The GECAC Program Director provided me with a list of the staff's names and contact information. I reached out to each staff via phone. Upon completing my phone calls, I followed up the conversation with Summer JAM staff using the Introductory Recruitment Email Script for Summer JAM Staff and Employers (Appendix B).

To recruit potential employers for the Summer JAM focus group, I worked with GECAC to identify a few employers that may be interested in participating. GECAC provided six potential employers' contact information to me via email. The information sent to me included each employer's name and contact information. I reached out to each employer via phone. I explained who I am and why I was contacting each of them. Three out of six employers I contacted agreed to participate. The employers who did not want to participate indicated that they were short-staffed and could not commit any additional time at the present time. Upon completing my phone calls, I followed up the conversation with all employers and Summer JAM

staff using the Introductory Recruitment Email Script for Summer JAM Staff and Employers
(Appendix B).

Once I sent the Introductory Recruitment Email Script for Summer JAM Staff and
Employers, I worked with GECAC and employers through email to set a date and time to meet
via Zoom. The agreed upon time to meet was September 10, 2021, at 1:30 p.m. The focus group
was schedule to be no longer than 60 minutes. Once the focus group began, I reviewed the Focus
Group Protocol and Questions (Appendix C) and confirmed that all present on the call were okay
with the focus group being recorded for transcription purposes. To record the meeting, I used the
Zoom recording feature. After the focus group, I sent a thank you email (Appendix D) thanking
the participants for their contribution to the focus group.

2.5.2 Employer and Youth Surveys

Each year, GECAC administers surveys to employers and youth who participate in the
program. GECAC provided me the results from the surveys for program years 2019 and 2020.
The surveys are a tool that GECAC utilizes to see where improvements may need to be made. I
read each document carefully and analyzed them by pulling out relevant information in order to
understand the value of the soft skills training. Due to the nature of this evaluation and the ages
of program participants, I did not collect personal names, addresses, and other identifiable
information from students or employer materials.

2.5.3 Soft Skills Curriculum

The current curriculum is Work Certified, a national program that focuses on soft skills.
The current delivery method is a mix of in-person and now video conferencing for the students in
the program. Topics covered are customer service, teamwork, intrapersonal skills, and

motivation. The Summer JAM staff presents these topics. Currently, there are no pre- or post-assessments administered.

2.6 Data Analysis

To analyze the data collected in this evaluation, I employed two cycles of coding. According to Saldaña (2021), the first cycle includes coding strategies that occur during the initial coding of data. I employed affective coding as my initial coding strategy. For my second cycle of coding, I employed pattern coding. Figure 7 illustrates the data sets and the type of coding used at each cycle.
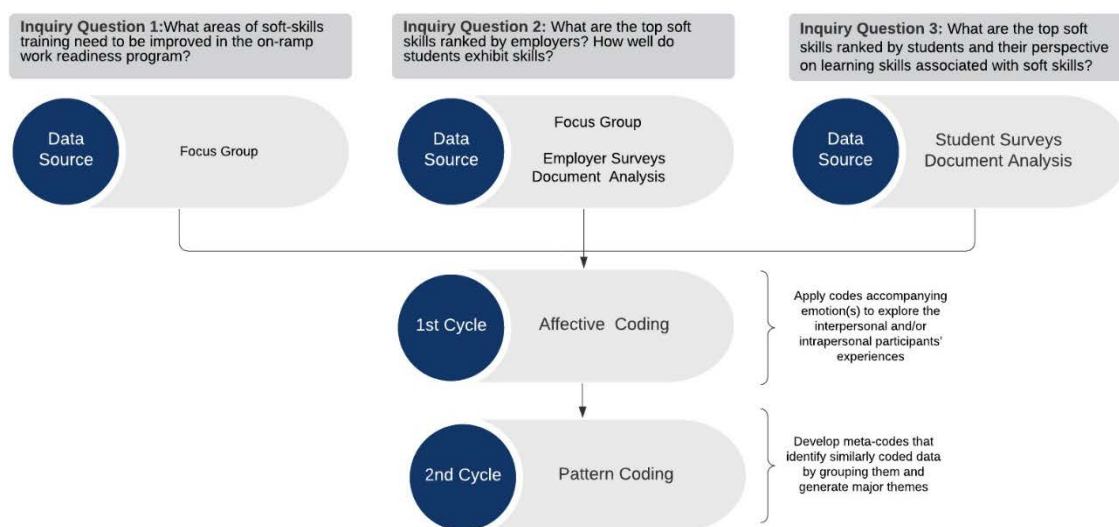
Figure 7. Cycles of Coding

Below I describe how I coded each set of data.

2.6.1 Focus Group Analysis

I conducted one focus group that included the Summer JAM Program Manager, the Summer JAM Program Director, one peer counselor, and three employers. The employers included a representative from a for-profit insurance agency, a coffee shop owner, and a

community neighborhood center leader. The meeting was conducted via Zoom on September 10, 2021, and lasted one hour. Table 4 illustrates the focus group participants and roles.

Table 4. Focus Group Particpants and Roles

Participant	Role
Summer JAM Program Director	Program Administrator
Summer JAM Program Manager	Program Oversight
Summer JAM Peer Counselor	Program Support
Neighborhood Community Center	Employer
Insurance Company HR Manager	Employer
Coffee Shop Owner	Employer

To code the focus group data, I used Dedoose, a Web-based qualitative analysis software program. Next, I upload the Video Zoom meeting to Happy Scribe, a Web-based transcription platform. Once the video was transcribed, I uploaded the transcription into Dedoose. I then performed first-cycle affective coding on all the qualitative data. The use of affective coding helped me identify any emotions, values, conflicts, and judgments related to human experience among employers and the staff involved in the program (Saldaña, 2021).

Once the first cycle was complete, I employed pattern coding, which consisted of identifying patterns and common themes (Saldaña, 2021) across the data. Patterns and themes identified included ADD and then add a concluding sentence.

2.6.2 Post Youth On-Ramp Orientation Surveys Analysis

To evaluate past program outcomes among the youth, I reviewed past survey data collected by the program. I pulled survey data from 2019–2020. For the youth on-ramp surveys, I did not focus on the entire survey. Rather, I reviewed specific questions from past survey data that focused only on the youth soft skill work readiness training (Appendix E). The survey asked students to indicate (poor, fair, good, and excellent) their abilities with specified soft skills after

participating in the full program. The data collected from past surveys was analyzed by reviewing how students ranked their work readiness training. Each student ranked the following: time management, good work habits, problem-solving, organizational skills, communication, and others. I took the students' survey responses from 2019–2020 and considered each area they ranked to see if there was a difference between employer and youth survey responses.

2.6.3 Post Employer Surveys Analysis

After the program, the Summer JAM Program administers a survey to employers that is much like the youth survey. To evaluate employer perceptions related to students' abilities with soft skills, I reviewed survey data from 2019–2020. I used the same methods I used for the student surveys. In addition, I reviewed only past survey data that focused on the Employer Soft Skill Work Readiness Survey (Appendix F). Since the current survey covers various programmatic areas, I used only the portion of the survey that focused on the soft skills on-ramp work readiness training. The survey asked employers to indicate (poor, fair, good, and excellent) how they felt students performed with certain soft skills while on the job. Each employer ranked the following: time management, good work habits, problem-solving, organizational skills, communication, and others.

2.6.4 Soft Skill Curriculum Analysis

During 2019 and 2020, the Summer JAM soft curriculum was presented via Zoom conferencing due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The training consisted of two training presentations that covered various soft skills topics. The Director of Human Resources conducted the first training, and the second training was conducted by a representative from a local insurance agency. To evaluate the training, I reviewed both videos and then transcribed and coded the document, first by using affective coding and then by pattern coding.

2.6.5 Trustworthiness of the Study

Scholars agree that there are four validation criteria for qualitative-interpretative research: credibility or internal validity, transferability or external validity, reliability, and confirmation (Barbour, 2001; Lincoln & Guba 1982). The results of this study were based on the participants' points of view about the experiences they lived and felt while participating in the Summer JAM Program. The sections that follow will discuss each validation criterion and show how each one was achieved.

2.6.6 Credibility

This criterion will be reached based on two strategies. The first strategy is the credibility of the participants. Given the broad experience of the participants in the study, it is believed that they are, indeed, qualified individuals with an appropriate knowledge and involvement in relation to the evaluation study. Therefore, it can be said that many of the participants were a good source of information since some may have participated in the program for many years.

The second strategy is to improve credibility. Data transcripts and the analysis process were reviewed by the supervisor of the program, if needed, to confirm that participants' perceptions and points of view are correctly reflected in the analysis and that new interpretations will be incorporated into the data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1982).

2.6.7 Transferability

Transferability is defined by the degree to which this study's outcomes could be adapted to other contexts. One method to establish transferability was to provide a complete description of the research context (i.e., the characteristics of the program), confirm that the features of the participants will ensure the transferability of the findings.

Finally, an exhaustive and clear description of each stage of the study through data collection and analysis to the discussion of the results will make it possible to replicate the study in any future research about the same topic.

2.6.8 Reliability

This criterion is related to the coherence between results and study development. In this regard, the written notes (research field journal) include all the decisions made during the data collection process and the premises that emerge during the data analysis.

2.6.9 Confirmation

This refers to the possibility of tracking data research to their source (Taylor and Medina, 2013). The researcher considered that personal biases needed to be minimized. For this, the data source triangulation techniques helped to provide responses characterized by the greatest possible objectivity. Thus, it should be noted that the researcher's field notes keep track of the analysis process, the decisions that will be made, and the reasons that led to such decisions.

Similarly, the use of a clear and strictly followed analysis process, with justified data collection instruments to achieve the objectives, ensured the confirmation of the data interpretations

2.7 Limitations

Due to the nature of this study, it was beyond the scope of this evaluation to conduct semi-structured interviews and focus groups with youth involved in the Summer JAM Program because most youth enrolled in the Summer JAM Program are below the age of 18 years old. Therefore, I only used student soft skills survey data collected from the program staff to elicit

participant perceptions pertaining to the soft skills work readiness training. Additionally, it should be noted that this evaluation study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.7.1 Institutional Review Board

The proposed study was presented to the Human Subjects Review Board on August 10, 2020. The committee determined the evaluation study to be exempt by the University of Pittsburgh Institutional Review Board (IRB) on August 16, 2021 (Appendix G).

2.7.2 Summary

The use of methods and analysis described allowed me to take a program and analyze various components by closely looking at the multiple pieces of the work readiness week, according to the program. The work readiness portion of the program is only one element of the targeted goals and outcomes.

In conclusion, the methods I employed for the project are only a portion of the overall program. Because of the nature of this evaluation, employers and Summer JAM staff were the only two groups who were part of the focus groups. Additionally, the survey analysis explored the thoughts and feelings related to the students and employers. Although there will be no direct in-person focus groups and interviews with the students involved in the program, focus groups and interviews with the students may be something future researchers may want to consider.

3.0 Evaluation Results

3.1 Introduction

This section will discuss the evaluation results of the study. The evaluation process for this study consisted of the facilitation of one focus group, survey data, and field notes gathered throughout the process. I will begin this section by highlighting challenges with the study as it relates to the COVID-19 pandemic. I will then describe and discuss the findings. To ensure that my inquiry questions are answered, each section will begin with the inquiry question followed by the purpose of the question and then the findings related to that question.

IQ1: What are the top soft skills ranked by employers? How well do students exhibit those skills?

IQ 2: What are the top soft skills ranked by students, and what is their perspective on learning skills associated with soft skills?

IQ3: What areas of soft-skills training need to be improved in the on-ramp work readiness program?

3.2 Findings Related to Inquiry Question 1

The following question will explore Inquiry Question 1 that asked, *What are the top soft skills ranked by employers? How well do students exhibit skills?* To answer this question, I used data gathered from the focus group and survey data collected by GECAC. The two themes that emerged from the focus group data were positive attitude and time management.

3.2.1 Positive Attitude

Lack of positive attitude was a theme that emerged during the analysis of data. The focus group participants referenced that most students do not complete the program, quit, or get terminated because of issues with their attitude.

The focus group noted that more of a focus on students' attitudes toward employers and the general functions within the constructs of the organization should be covered during the work readiness on-ramp week. The coffee shop owner felt that issues around attitude could be attributed to the age of the students in the program. She also mentioned that she ranks a positive attitude high on her list because if students have the "right attitude" toward their work and employer, she believes they are most likely to succeed in the program.

The Neighborhood Community Center Director agreed that a positive attitude goes a long way in his organization. The director mentioned that many issues he dealt with pertained to dress code, cell phones, and inappropriate music while on the job. At times, the director mentioned he had to remind students about those areas, and when he did, he got the "bad attitude" from students. For example, the director mentioned that he had to remind students to turn the music down because everyone could hear the music playing. However, students got upset because they were asked not to listen to music. The employer said:

> I do not mind if you want to listen to music while on break. If you listen to music while on break, you need to turn the music down because everyone can hear what you are listening to, although you are wearing headphones.

The employer mentioned that the student presented a "bad attitude" when he approached the student simply because he was asked to turn his music down. As a result, the employer mentioned that the student quit without notice.

One of the Summer JAM staff mentioned that they lost many students due to students not exhibiting a positive attitude while on the job. The staff member said:

> Students are not allowed to wear hats in the building; they must return from breaks on time, remain awake throughout the sessions, and show up on time.

The Neighborhood Center Director added:

> *If students cannot follow the program's basic rules, we drop them out of the program. In*
>
> *some cases, some students quit.*

Positive attitude resonated as a top skill that employers considered high on their list of soft skills. In general, all the employers agreed that even if a student is deficient in understanding their job functions, they at least need to be willing to learn and have a positive attitude. They said they could work with the students to achieve the skills they need to succeed while at their place of employment. When asked about the organizational consequences of bad attitudes, the employers and the Summer JAM staff mentioned that bad attitudes are contagious and lead to moral issues in the organization.

3.2.2 Time Management

Time management was a skill that emerged in our conversation during the focus group. The HR manager mentioned that she had a hard time locating students when they were late returning from breaks and lunches. The employers also had problems associated with students arriving to work on time.

In addition to arriving to work on time and taking breaks when appropriate, the Neighborhood Center director said that on a few occasions he found students sleeping when they were supposed to be working. When the director asked the students why they were sleeping, their response was that they were bored and had nothing to do or that they stayed up too late the night before and were tired.

Another area of concern among members of the focus group was students filling out timecards. The employers indicated that students said they either forgot to fill them out or did not have time. The director of the Neighborhood Center mentioned that he often had to remind

students that they need to allocate time at the end of their shift to enter their timecard. He said the app is on their phone. The director shared:

> *I would tell them it's your responsibility, not mine. If you want to get paid, then you need to take time out of the day to enter your timecard.*

All the employers, including the Summer JAM staff, indicated that they had to give students constant reminders throughout the summer. For example, one employer shared that she had a student threaten her about her paycheck, and another student just quit. When I asked if there is training on the system during the on-ramp week, the Summer JAM staff indicated that they spend an entire morning covering the system and when time is due in order to get paid. Additionally, the Summer JAM staff shared that it is the student's responsibility to work with their employers to allocate time to enter their timecards at the end of their shift.

As a consideration, the employers and the Summer JAM staff agreed that time management should include how to use time appropriately at work and what the next steps are if they run out of things to do. Time management is a skill employers viewed as a high priority. Through data analysis, time management was associated with the employer's ability to trust students to use their time appropriately; for example, taking breaks when appropriate, working and not sleeping, returning from breaks on time, and making sure they allocate the time to do their timecards at the end of each day.

3.2.3 Findings Related to Inquiry Question 2

The first section (Findings Related to Inquiry Question 1) highlighted the top soft skills ranked by employers? How well do students exhibit those skills? Inquiry Question 2 asked, *What*

are the top soft skills ranked by students and their perspective on learning skills associated with soft skills? To answer this question, I reviewed survey results from 2019 and 2020 conducted by GECAC.

Presented below are findings from the historical student survey data. Due to the nature of the program, interviews with youth did not occur because of the program's obligation to protecting student information. Therefore, to elicit data from youth, I used historical data collected through surveys to understand youth perspectives related to the program.

It should be noted that when I reviewed data previously collected by GECAC, there was a gap in the questions regarding soft skills among the students and the questions asked among employers. Because the questions about soft skills were not consistent between the two groups, the data pertaining to the perception of soft skill training could not be compared to the soft skill training in the employers' perspectives.

The skills assessed by the student surveys were time management, good work habits, problem-solving, organizational skills, and communication. Table 5 highlights how students ranked their own ability to use these skills in the workplace across two years of averaged scores. In 2019, 132 students completed the survey. In 2020, 88 students completed the survey. Scores were measured on a scale 1–5, with 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Somewhat Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Somewhat Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree.

Table 5. Youth Assesment of Soft Skills Development

Skill	2019	2020
Time Management	4.43	4.53
Good Work Habits	4.55	4.51
Problem-Solving	4.39	4.45
Organizational Skills	4.35	4.40
Communication	4.50	4.41

Youth scores ranged from 4.35 for "organizational skills" to 4.55 for "good work habits." From these scores, most of the youth at least "somewhat agreed" that the work readiness on-ramp training helped them gain soft skills before entering their places of employment.

Based on the student data, there is a gap between employers and what students are reporting. Additionally, it should be noted that the soft skills questions on the student assessment did not reflect the same soft skills questions employers were asked on their survey. Therefore, the data reflecting the soft skill assessment could not be compared. The employers were asked to assess students in the areas of teamwork, critical thinking, communication, flexibility, intrapersonal skills, and positive attitude. The students were asked to assess their soft skills abilities in time management, good work habits, problem-solving, organizational skills, and communication. Based on the difference between the two surveys and how the questions were asked, there seems to be a gap in the survey responses among students and employers.

3.3 Findings Related to Inquiry Question 3

Inquiry Question 3 asked, *What areas of soft-skills training need to be improved in the on-ramp work readiness program?* This question was designed to explore the current work readiness on-ramp training and determine any areas of improvement in order to decrease the program attrition rate. To answer this question, I relied on the focus group data results and historical (2018–2020) employer surveys. In analyzing the focus group data, three themes emerged during the second cycle of coding: *teamwork, modeling skills, brand development,* and *communication skills.*

3.3.1 Teamwork

During the focus group, all the participants expressed the importance of teamwork as a skill. All three employers reiterated that teamwork in their organizations promote healthy

relationships among employees. When asked to provide examples of teamwork, the employer, who owns a small coffee shop, shared that she reviews the handbook for all employees, including the Summer JAM youth. The coffee shop owner mentioned:

> *You may have 30 lattés that you need to make; you need to be willing to ask for help and*
> *be willing to help other members of your team.*

The Neighborhood Community Center Director agreed. He stated:

> *Although the type of work we do at the center may be different than your business, it all*
> *boils down to teamwork. A lot of the jobs here at the center require them to get along and*
> *work together on projects.*

The Center Director explained that he had six students, and they all had to work together doing janitorial and maintenance work. In addition, the center is doing some minor renovations, and some of the jobs require all the students to work independently at times and other times as a team.

In addition to the comments made by the Neighborhood Center Director and the coffee shop owner, the HR manager at the insurance company explained that her students are expected to work on various projects together. When I asked what types of projects, she said:

> *As part of the program, we ask our students to work as a team to develop a presentation.*
> *We give our students time each week to work on their projects. The purpose of the*
> *presentation is to promote teamwork and allow for an opportunity to present how they*
> *think their experience went here at the organization.*

In general, the group discussed that no matter what, teamwork is an essential soft skill. Furthermore, the group discussed that the program should consider more team-building activities to promote team-building among the students.

3.3.2 Modeling Soft Skills

During the focus group, the theme of *modeling* emerged. The coffee shop owner

explained that modeling what different types of soft skills should look like while students are on

the job is important because for many of the youth, this is their first experience. For example, if

the goal is to help the student understand what teamwork looks like, students should have an

opportunity to model a scenario.

Modeling was mentioned by all the employers during the focus group. All the

participants who responded agreed that modeling soft skills is important, and students should

have an opportunity to model a variety of soft skills throughout the work readiness training week

to help prepare them before being placed with their employer.

When I asked what their definition of modeling is, both the HR manager and coffee shop

owner responded. The coffee shop owner stated:

> *I define modeling as offering some time for students to mock what teamwork looks like*
>
> *amongst themselves.*

The HR manager said:

> *We can preach at the youth all day about teamwork; I really think students learn best by*
>
> *learning from each other.*

All the employers in the focus group reiterated that modeling promotes learning from

each other, and it helps students learn how to communicate with customers and others on their

team. All employers agreed that there is a lot of value in modeling various scenarios and agreed

that feeling comfortable and demonstrating among their peers is a skill that should be taught

during the work readiness on-ramp week.

The Program Manager expressed the need to use modeling as a potential activity throughout the work readiness week. Currently, the week does not allow for modeling activities, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The reduction of hours allotted during the on-ramp week has limited what the program can cover. However, the program staff did agree that they should consider incorporating modeling opportunities in next year's program since the employers feel it is an essential component to help students learn soft skills. The program staff suggested that once they teach a specific soft skill, modeling using various types of scenarios would be a good way to reinforce student learning.

3.3.3 Brand Development

Although brand development is not a soft skill, members of the focus group discussed that it is important for youth to understand that when they exhibit good soft skills, they promote a good brand for themselves. For example, one employer discussed that students need to understand that how they communicate and "carry themselves at work" are part of their brand.

In addition to branding, the HR manager shared that students at her company are required to develop an elevator speech while they are employed. An elevator speech is a 30-second opportunity to promote the company or themselves when given the opportunity. I asked the HR manager if they help students develop their speech. The employer shared that understanding their brand and how to promote their brand should be considered part of the work readiness onboarding week because it helps students put their best foot forward in framing their brand.

The peer counselor mentioned that she used to be a student in the program and remembers being placed at the insurance company for her summer employment opportunity. The HR manager said she remembers the student. The peer counselor mentioned:

I remember learning about branding, and I use this skill all the time. I use my elevator speech all the time to promote my brand. I think this is an important lifelong skill. Many of our students have no idea how important branding is and how important it is when communicating to others.

The group discussed how branding intersects with soft skills and that working with students to develop their brand is vital, especially for students during their first year in the program. The director mentioned that students must see themselves as part of the system and, more importantly, see themselves positively. The group felt that incorporating how to develop their brand and then practicing it should be another option for the program to consider in order to help students enrolled in the program build confidence.

3.3.4 Communication Skills

Another theme that emerged throughout the focus group was student *communication skills.* There were two sub-themes that emerged when disusing communication. The group collectively discussed online communication such as social media and the use of technology (e.g., texting) for the purpose of communication while on the job. The group discussed that they are all having issues with youths' use of social media while at work. The director at the Neighborhood Community Center shared that the Summer JAM Program should consider developing a training to discuss things students should remember when using social media.

The Neighborhood Community Center Director shared that a customer told him that one of his students had a social media account with some language that she felt was not good. Furthermore, the student was posting that content while at work. The employer shared that although access to the Internet is a good thing, posting while at work is not. Youth must understand that online communication can impact them and the organization they represent.

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The HR manager at the insurance company mentioned that her organization is a Fortune 500 company. She also mentioned that many HR managers use websites to research possible hires for their organizations.

In addition to social media, the use of technology to communicate was a problem that was presented during the focus group. The coffee shop owner indicated that their policy requires all employees to call their supervisor if they are running late or calling in sick. The employer mentioned that she had to repeatedly remind students that texting their supervisor was unacceptable and that they needed to talk to their supervisor. Employers mentioned that they all have to remind students about their cell phone policies, sometimes resulting in termination or the students dropping out of the program.

The group collectively agreed that communication is very broad and suggested that communication be broken into two topics: how we communicate with others while at work and how we communicate using social media. Because social media is embedded in many of the students' lives, it was suggested that students need to understand that what they post can impact their employment opportunities in the future. The group felt that the program should not focus on the negative aspects of social media but rather on how to use social media in a positive way.

The following is data collected from historical data collected by GECAC from employers. In 2019 and 2020, employers ranked students' skills in the areas of teamwork, critical thinking, communication, flexibility, intrapersonal skills, leadership, and a positive attitude. At the conclusion of 2019 and 2020, employers ranked the work readiness program on a scale of 1–5 with 1 = poor, 2 = fair, 3 = good, 4 = excellent, and 5 = don't know (DK). The same survey was issued for the 2020 program year. Table 6 illustrates the results.

Table 6. Employer Soft Skills Survey Results 2019–2020

Skill	2019	2020
Teamwork	2.87	3.00
Critical Thinking	2.53	2.50
Communication	2.75	2.88
Flexibility	2.88	2.38
Intrapersonal Skills	2.69	2.63
Positive Attitude	2.88	3.25

3.4 Soft Skill Curriculum Analysis

Presented below are findings found through the analysis of the soft skill curriculum for the Summer JAM Program. It should be noted that there were two soft skills presentations for the students. The soft skills curriculum was presented using Zoom.

The first presentation was presented by an HR hiring manager at a local insurance agency. The total time for the presentation was 22 minutes and five seconds. The total presentation time was 10 minutes and 39 seconds, leaving 11 minutes and 66 seconds for questions from the students. The presenter used a PowerPoint presentation. The topics covered were mindset and positive attitude in the workplace, performance (showcasing talents), attendance and punctuality, cooperation, personal appearance (dress code and grooming), avoiding distractions (cell phone usage policy), social media, and job safety. In addition, the HR manager spent about 10 minutes highlighting the top "Do's and Don'ts" for success at work. Table 7 Illustrates the Do's and Don'ts that were presented.

Table 7. Do's and Don'ts for Success at Work

Do's	Don'ts
Honesty and Integrity	Discuss Politics or Religion
Customer Service Skills	Gossip
Problem-Solving Skills	Complain
Welcome Diversity	Use Vulgar or Offensive Language
Flexible and Adaptable	Show Up Late

Self-Motivated	Lie or Bend the Truth
Willing to Grow	Dress Inappropriately
Respectable Volume	Engage in Sexual or Racial Banter

Upon completion of the training, the presenter asked if there were any questions. The students asked a total of five questions. In regard to the questions asked by students, one common theme was interviewing skills. The following were questions asked by the students after the training:

1. What was the worse interview you were involved in?

2. What tips would you give someone who is nervous for an interview?

3. If you are unaware of how to answer a question during an interview, how would you respond?

The following questions were asked by students and were not related to interviewing. Instead, the questions focused on behaviors at work.

1. Why can't we engage in political discussions as long as they are respectable?

2. What are some tips to help someone new to the job?

Based on the questions asked, the students did not seem to have questions related to soft skills. Most of the questions were related to interviewing, although most of the presentation focused on soft skills. Based on the two nonrelated soft skills questions connected with broader skills around communication and teamwork discussed during the employer focus groups, Appropriate communication while at work and teamwork will help students learn from each other to develop areas that need improvement.

The Director of Human Resources presented the second presentation at GECAC. The presentation was presented using Zoom and lasted six minutes. There was no PowerPoint for the youth to follow. The presenter highlighted five soft skills he likes to see. These soft skills were communication, teamwork, problem-solving, leadership, and self-motivation. After the presentation, students were not asked if they had any questions. I uploaded the Zoom video for transcription, and once it was transcribed, I used affective coding followed by pattern coding. The theme that emerged was cell phones. Many of the examples given throughout the presentation linked back to the students' use of cell phones on the job. For example, the director mentioned:

> *You cannot communicate with others if you are always on your cell phone, and if you are always on your cell phone, how do you build relationships?*

3.4.1 Analysis of Soft Skills Curriculum Presentations Combined

Based on both presentations, it should be noted that there was no pre- or post-testing in order for students to test their knowledge. Both presentations combined lasted about 30 minutes. Table 8 shows the skills taught versus the skills students asked on the soft skills assessment in order to measure their competency. The first column shows the soft skills they were asked to rank on their soft skills assessment survey. The second and third columns illustrate if the skill they are being ranked was taught. Table 9 shows all the additional skills that were taught during the presentations.

Based on the data represented in Tables 8 and 9, there were 17 soft skills covered during the presentations. However, only two of those soft skills (problem-solving and communication) are reflected on the student surveys they are asked to fill out in order to assess their competency.

In addition to the soft skills presentations, I reviewed the Summer JAM schedule (Appendix H). When reviewing the schedule, only two sessions throughout the training focused on soft skills. Each session was scheduled for half an hour. Based on the schedule, the students spent most of their time covering payroll procedures, listening to community leader presentations, and reviewing the Summer JAM Handbook. Although there was some time allotted for activities and homework assignment reviews, the schedule was unclear as to what those activities entailed.

Table 8. Skills Taught during Presentation Versus Skills Students Asked on Soft Skills Assessment

Student Soft Skills Assessment Survey Questions	Skill Taught during Soft Skills Presentation 1	Skills Taught during Soft Skills Presentation 2
Time Management		
Good Work Habits		
Problem-Solving	Problem-Solving	Problem-Solving
Organizational Skills		
Communication		Communication

Table 9. Additional Soft Skills Covered during the Soft Skills Presentations

Additional Skills Taught during the Presentations
Honesty and Integrity
Customer Service Skills
Welcome Diversity
Flexible and Adaptable
Self-Motivated
Willing to Grow
Respectable Volume
Mindset and Positive Attitude
Workplace Performance
Attendance and Punctuality
Cooperation
Personal Appearance
Avoiding Distractions of Social Media
Social Media
Job Safety

<div align="center">**4.0 Discussion**</div>

Throughout this evaluation, I have sought to explore why the student attrition rate is high for participants in the Summer JAM Program. This chapter encompasses limitations, discussions and findings, and next steps and implications. This chapter will conclude with considerations for future research.

4.1 Discussion of Findings

With those limitations in mind, this evaluation did provide insight into the three inquiry questions asked throughout the study. The first inquiry question asked, *What are the top soft skills ranked by employers? How well do students exhibit skills?* During the focus group, all the employers agreed that soft skills in their organizations rank high on their list ("A Study of Engineering Education," 1918). Lippman et al. (2015) illustrate the Higher-Order of Skills, which are communication, positive self-concept, self-control, and social skills. These skills are generally consistent with the Summer JAM employers.

Robles (2012) also acknowledged that long-term success is dependent on the use of soft skills. With that said, it is important to ensure that students are assessed using the soft skills in a consistent manner. According to Carol et al. (2020), soft skills can be assessed differently, depending on the employer. Furthermore, when reviewing the past survey data, students' soft skills questions were not the same as the employers'. Because the employers' questions were different from the students' questions, the responses could not be compared. Perhaps questions for both surveys should align for the purpose of a comparative evaluation.

Additionally, the soft skills curriculum did not cover all the topics the students and employers were being asked to assess. Based on the literature, Jack et al. (2020) suggest that employers and program designers should be included in the development of training programs.

By bridging the gap between employers and soft skills assessment, aligning the program's curriculum will help close the gap.

Finally, it should be noted that although soft skills can be taught in training, we don't know how programs such as the Summer JAM Program ensures that those desired skills asked by employers transfer to the work environment. The Transfer of Training Model introduced by Baldwin and Ford (1988) illustrates three characteristics of the students in order to ensure that the design of the training and the environment to support the learning activities are met. That leads to student learning and retention (Baldwin & Ford, 1988). Although employers may have their own particular expectations for soft skills, the importance of the student's ability to transfer what is learned from the training presented itself as an essential matter.

The study also asked a second inquiry question: *What are the top soft skills ranked by students and their perspective on learning skills associated with soft skills?* This evaluation looked at student surveys collected by GECAC to determine how they assessed their soft skills after work readiness training. Scores were measured on a scale of 1–5, with 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Somewhat Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Somewhat Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree. Students ranked themselves in all categories between 4 and 5. When evaluating the student survey scores and reviewing the data from the focus group, there seems to be a disconnect between the employers and the students regarding the definition of soft skills (Carol et al., 2020). Majid et al. (2019) discuss that many new students do not always know or understand soft skills. Based on that gap between the presentations and the students' on-ramp surveys, there is a lack of connection between the student perceptions, definition, and expectations of soft skills, which may contribute to their attrition rate. Heller (2014) found similar attrition rates among student enrolled in a summer

program similar to the Summer JAM Program. Heller noting that only 63 percent of students enrolled completed the summer program.

Inquiry Question 3 asked, *What areas of the soft-skills training need to be improved during the on-ramp work readiness program?* This question was from the perspective of the employers and Summer JAM staff. By analyzing focus group data and employer survey data, two improvements emerged as considerations for improvement during the work readiness on-ramp week. These areas include adding time for students to practice soft skills through modeling activities and collaboration between employers and the Summer JAM team regarding the soft skill curriculum.

As discussed in the second chapter, employers heavily emphasize soft skills among new employees (Ritter et al., 2018). Orr et al. (2011) suggest that the key to success begins with soft skills. While this is important to the Summer JAM Program, there is a gap between what is taught during the on-ramp week and how students are evaluated at their place of employment. Based on the focus group, participants favorably agree that one area that needs to be improved is the opportunities for the youth to demonstrate the soft skills learned throughout the on-ramp week. Robles (2012) posits that opportunities for students to learn from each other help support their learning. Currently, modeling and practicing soft skills is not an activity in the program. The employers in the focus groups favorably agree that this tool should be considered in the future.

According to the literature, students learn best when they spend more time teaching others (90 percent) and practice doing (75 percent) (the National Training Laboratory Institute, 1960). To support student learning and development during the work readiness on-ramp week, an area of improvement should be helping students allow more opportunities to model behaviors.

In addition to allowing students to demonstrate learning through activities during the on-ramp week, the second improvement that should be considered is how to effectively transfer skills learned from training to the student's work environment. For example, students could be given a scenario they must work together to act out with their peers. Once the scenario is complete, the Summer JAM staff can provide feedback and suggestions based on what the Summer JAM Staff observed.

Other areas of improvement during the on-ramp week should include more collaboration between employers and Summer JAM staff. Based on previous literature, the Summer JAM Program staff and program employers could benefit from collaborating on skills taught and how those skills are evaluated (Robles, 2012). Collaboration should include a discussion about desired skills that should be taught throughout the work readiness week and a discussion about how such skills will be assessed and supported.

Based on the past survey assessments for the soft skills training, this review found a gap between how students perceive their soft skills and how employers perceive them. Projects such as the Summer JAM Program should focus on making sure assessment materials align. In order to align materials, collaboration is essential among employers and the Summer JAM staff.

Furthermore, collaboration among employers and the Summer JAM staff to discuss such skills is also important. Jack et el. (2020) suggest that when implementing soft skills training programs, employers should be included in the planning process to ensure that the skills being taught are relevant to the jobs the youth will be working. Further discussions among employers and the Summer JAM staff may benefit the employers, the students, and the Summer JAM staff. The focus group and survey document analysis gave some insights into some of the gaps in what is being taught and what is being assessed.

Another area to consider is how employers communicate with the youth in the program. Constructive feedback lets the employer communicate with students to help address soft skill issues. Also, employers should recognize that generational attributes, such as the age gap, can contribute to communication and constructive feedback. Write (2019) suggests that employers should consider how to engage and communicate with constructive feedback due to generational gaps. Additionally, since soft skills are not always part of the high school curriculum, employers should understand that soft skills may need to be taught and reinforced on the job for youth enrolled in summer programs.

Beyond collaboration around the top soft skills desired by the employers, it was evident that the students' inability to take what was learned did not transfer to their work environments, according to my review of the data collected from the soft skill survey that GECAC distributes to the employers and the students. Inconsistent soft skills were being captured. Based on the student data, there is a gap between what employers and students are reporting. Additionally, it should be noted that the soft skills questions on the student assessment did not reflect the same soft skills questions employers were asked on their survey. Therefore, the data reflecting the soft skill assessment could not be compared. The employers were asked to assess students in the areas of teamwork, critical thinking, communication flexibility, intrapersonal skills, and positive attitude. The students were asked to assess their soft skills abilities in the areas of time management, good work habits, problem-solving, organizational skills, and communication. Based on the differences between the two surveys and how the questions were asked, there seems to be a gap in the survey responses among students and employers. Furthermore, during the analysis of the soft skills training videos, the soft skills presenters spent much of their time presenting soft skills

that were not relevant to the actual soft skills on the survey assessment students were asked to fill out.

4.1.1 Evaluation Logic Model Analysis

To assess the Summer JAM Program, I reviewed the program logic model based on evaluation findings to determine if the program needs additional support to help achieve the program's impact. For example, when evaluating the input for the soft skills curriculum, I looked at the work performed under the activities to see if the direct results under the outputs resulted in the intended outcomes. Each input was evaluated using this strategy. I also reviewed the inputs, activities, and outputs to see if the current Logic Model and its linkages (relationships) had the capacity to achieve the desired outcomes. This approach will help me understand what programmatic resources (if any) should be considered to achieve the Summer JAM's programmatic impact.

Based on the findings in this study, there is a mismatch between inputs, activities, and outputs on the current Evaluation Logic Model. For example, the soft skills curriculum serves as an *Input* rather than an *Activity*. Also, since the soft skills presentations are conducted by select employers in the community, who agree to present the soft skills training, presenters should be considered an *Input* on the Evaluation Logic Model. Recognizing the presenters as an input can be directly linked to the Activities and the Outputs. Working with employers, the program could more fully list specific activities, outputs, and outcomes that fall within the idea of soft skills. This could then be utilized to revise surveys to more specifically and consistently measure soft skills. An example for consideration is providing youth with opportunities to model soft skills as a specific *Activity* for the soft skills curriculum. It is recommended that GECAC revisit and revise the

program's evaluation logic model based on study findings and the current implementation of the program and share with stakeholders.

4.2 Next Steps and Implications

The next steps are recommended based on my evaluation of the program. There is a need to revisit the Logic Model as a team and consider the following as measures that may improve the program. Based on the findings, the program should consider the following:

1. Allocate more time to soft skills.

2. Redesign the surveys assessments so they are consistent among employers and students.

   a. Include a clear definition of soft skills in the survey. There seems to be a gap among the program staff, employers, and the youth of what the definition of each skill is.

   b. Align soft skills training with the soft skills survey assessment that students and employers fill out at the conclusion of the program.

3. Allocate time for students to practice modeling the soft skills taught throughout the week.

4. Include the assessment tool administered by the GECAC as part of the program's input in the Logic Model.

5. GECAC should adopt an industry-recognized training curriculum that includes pre- and post-testing and incorporates pre- and post-testing into the program.

6. The surveys should be consistent among students and employers.

a. Clear definitions of each soft skill should be included in the survey. There seems to be a gap of what the definition of each skill is among the program staff, employers, and the youth.

4.3 Future Considerations for Research

Based on this evaluation, this study found that these areas should include the following components: student and employer assessments should align with the actual skills taught in the program, and the presentations should align with the student assessment surveys. Additionally, the collaboration between employers and the Summer JAM staff to discuss what skills they would like the program to focus on throughout the on-ramp week will help the program focus on a specific set of soft skills. In addition, assessment alignment and collaboration, and the agreed-upon skills should align with the presentations. The next component would be to allow students to demonstrate skills learned through scenarios or modeling exercises.

Due to the limited time with students during the on-ramp week, activities and training that are not focused on soft skills may have to be evaluated so more time can be placed on the soft skills presentations. Based on the attrition rate and employer feedback, more time should be considered to present soft skills.

Although soft skills are a contributing factor regarding attrition, it appears that some students do well in the program. Research has demonstrated that students learn best from others (National Training Laboratory Institute, 1960). Using returning students to help facilitate learning can thus have an impact on the program's attrition rate. Having returning students act as mentors for students who struggle to use and understand soft skills may be an added level of support.

This evaluation did not do extensive data collection on the student's point of view. Such collaboration with students is an important factor that should be considered for future research. Student perspectives can play a role in how the program delivers soft skills during the on-ramp week. Further student evaluation to help identify those soft skills may lead to better attrition rates among students.

4.4 Conclusion

This dissertation aimed to evaluate why there is a low attrition rate among students in the Erie County Summer Jobs and More (JAM) Program and, through evaluation, sought to explore the work-readiness portion of that program. This evaluation showed gaps in the presentation, assessment surveys, and communication between the Summer JAM team and the employers. Although multiple gaps can affect student retention, the importance of stakeholder engagement (Summer JAM team, soft skills presenters, and employers) is to ensure that all materials relative to soft skills are consistent with achieving the program's intended outcomes. My research found that peer-to-peer learning for students is a proven approach for programs similar to the Summer JAM Program.

Because of today's workforce and the need for employers to recruit talent, further research should be considered to help youth, employers, and program designers understand what should be evaluated in order to ensure the success of the Summer JAM Program and similar programs. For most students in these programs, it is their first job and thus their first experience in the workplace. Program design is thus essential. Future research should include evaluating the type of work youth

are expected to perform and whether these work experiences lead to a career pathway for those youth. If the youth see the work they do as valuable and a gateway to future employment in a specific field, that may help the attrition rate in programs such as the Summer JAM Program.

This project has helped me, as the former director of the Summer JAM Program, take a holistic look at the program. As the evaluator, I considered it my task to assess what was affecting the attrition rate and what questions I possibly should have asked in my role as director. If I had asked those questions, I considered how I might have evaluated the program in order to identify the possible causes of attrition. By analyzing the various elements of the program coupled with research, I identified not only the gaps but also the solutions.

4.5 Participation and Impact of COVID-19

The evaluation study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the pandemic, the Summer JAM Program design for the 2021 season required the program delivery to be adjusted. The on-ramp week, which typically met in person one week before placing students with their employers, met virtually instead. The sessions went from five full days from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. to three days for six and a half hours each day. Additionally, the program only recruited and graduated 133 of the projected 150 students for the summer program. According to the Program Director, the low recruitment was due to COVID-19 and youth finding higher-paying employment on their own for the summer. During a discussion with the director, she indicated that the program could not compete with other companies that were offering higher wages. For example, some of the local fast-food chain restaurants were offering $13–$14 per

hour compared to $8.25 per hour the program pays the youth. This area of concern contributed to the attrition rate for the program. The director indicated that companies that were not part of the program placed a heavy emphasis on youth recruitment for summertime employment. When I asked what type of companies the Summer JAM Program was competing with, the director indicated local restaurants, amusement parks, and hotels. The director stated, "Students can work anywhere they want and make more money. Plus, they don't have to participate in the program to find a job." The director stated further, "When jobs were hard to find locally, students utilized the program as a way to connect with employers; now that's not the case."

The shortage of employers that offered to enroll in the program also had its challenges. The director indicated that many employers that participated in the past did not want to participate because they did not have the staff to help train students. The program aims to recruit 75 employers each summer. For the summer of 2021 program, the program enrolled 49 employers.

Recruiting peer counselors was also a challenge. Typically, the program hires three peer counselors to help support the summer program. However, during the 2021 program, the program only had two peer counselors.
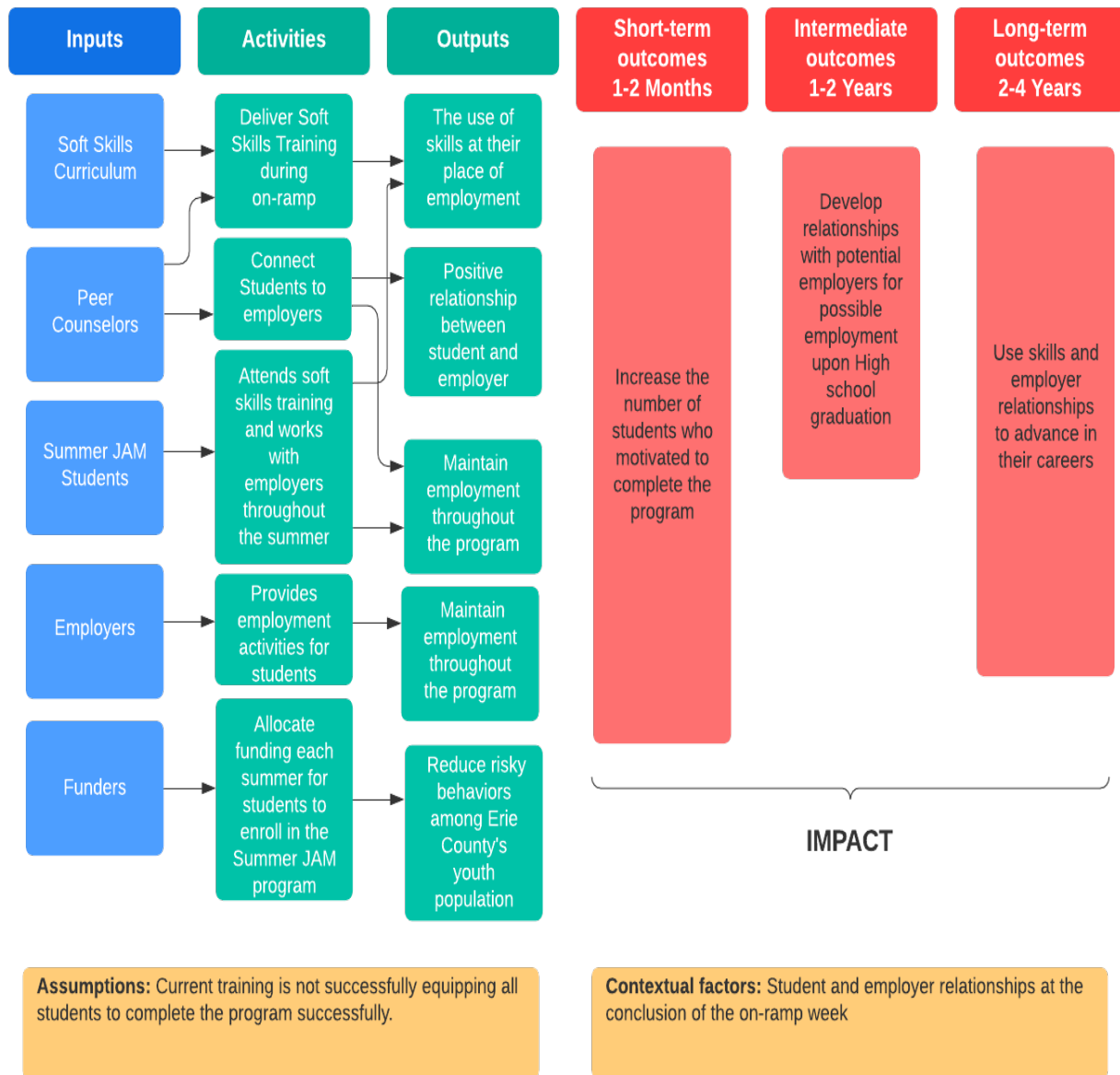
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Appendix A – Summer JAM Evaluation Logic Model

Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Short-term outcomes 1-2 Months	Intermediate outcomes 1-2 Years	Long-term outcomes 2-4 Years
Soft Skills Curriculum	Deliver Soft Skills Training during on-ramp	The use of skills at their place of employment	Increase the number of students who motivated to complete the program	Develop relationships with potential employers for possible employment upon High school graduation	Use skills and employer relationships to advance in their careers
Peer Counselors	Connect Students to employers	Positive relationship between student and employer			
Summer JAM Students	Attends soft skills training and works with employers throughout the summer	Maintain employment throughout the program			
Employers	Provides employment activities for students	Maintain employment throughout the program			
Funders	Allocate funding each summer for students to enroll in the Summer JAM program	Reduce risky behaviors among Erie County's youth population			

IMPACT

Assumptions: Current training is not successfully equipping all students to complete the program successfully.

Contextual factors: Student and employer relationships at the conclusion of the on-ramp week

Subject Line: Invitation to participate in an evaluation of the Summer Jobs and More (JAM)

Program's effectiveness of the Soft Skills Training

Dear _____,

The purpose of my email is to see if you are willing to participate in a study I am

conducting on the Summer Jobs and More (JAM) Program. This research study aims to

determine the effectiveness of the Summer JAM Program's work readiness program. For that

reason, I will be conducting a focus group (45–60 minutes) with Summer JAM staff. If you are

willing to participate, be assured that my research will not include any of the following: age,

race, years of education, family background, or your feelings about yourself and other

individuals. There are no foreseeable risks associated with this project, nor are there any direct

benefits to you. This study is entirely anonymous, so your responses will not be identifiable in

any way. All responses are confidential, and results will be kept under lock and key. Your

participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from this project at any time. This study is

being conducted by Ben Wilson who can be reached at 814-860-6348 if you have any questions.

Here is an outline of what will take place during the study:

1. If you confirm that you would like to participate in the study, I will work with all

   interested participants to coordinate a date for the focus group. Once a date is

   confirmed, I will send a Zoom link with the date and connection details.

2. After our meeting, I will email you a transcription (written summary) of our

   interview. After you have had the opportunity to review the summary, we will have a

   10-minute telephone call where you can offer any additions to the summary or clarify

   anything I may have misunderstood.

3. I will write up the results of the study, and those results will be shared with the University of Pittsburgh. The study will be published upon completion of my work at D-Scholarship@Pitt. To protect your identity, your name will not be used in the study.

If you are interested in the study, please respond to this email within the next three calendar days.

Thank you for considering participating in this project.

Sincerely,

Benjamin D. Wilson, M.A.

University of Pittsburgh, Ed.D. Candidate, 2021

Appendix C – Focus Group Protocol and Questions

Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me. The information from this focus group will provide key information that potentially will serve as a platform to create new strategies to better prepare students who are in programs similar to the Summer JAM Program. The following is the basic discussion protocol:

- o Welcome greeting and a brief explanation of the purpose of the focus group.

- o Introductions

- o Notify participants that the Zoom call will be recorded.

Questions:

1. How can programs like the Summer JAM Program prepare youth entering the workforce to develop soft skills? (IQ3)

2. How would you define soft skills? (IQ3)

3. What soft skills would you like to see students have before entering your organization? (IQ3)

4. Do you think there is a gap between what is taught versus what you see among the youth entering your organization? (IQ3)

5. How do you think older workers perceive youth concerning soft skills at your organization? (IQ3)

6. How do you think employers should support youth as they enter their organizations? (IQ2)

7. What skills do you think are the employer's responsibility to teach (hard or soft), and why? (IQ2)

8. What strategies have you used to help support youth new to employment at your

    organization, and do you think those strategies should be implemented in the program

    design? (IQ2)

Appendix D – Thank You Email

Dear_____,

Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me. The information I gained from our time together will provide key information that potentially will serve as a platform to create new strategies to better prepare students in programs similar to the Summer JAM Program.

If you have any further questions about the project, please feel free to reach out to me at 814-860-6348, or you can email me at bdw36@pitt.edu.

Yours truly,

Ben Wilson

University of Pittsburgh

2021 Doctorial Ed.D. Candidate

Appendix E – Youth Soft Skill Work Readiness Training Survey

7. I believe the **Summer JAM Program will** help me develop the following soft-skills:

Time management	☐ Strongly Agree	☐ Somewhat Agree	☐ Neutral	☐ Somewhat Disagree	☐ Strongly Disagree
Good work habits	☐ Strongly Agree	☐ Somewhat Agree	☐ Neutral	☐ Somewhat Disagree	☐ Strongly Disagree
Problem solving	☐ Strongly Agree	☐ Somewhat Agree	☐ Neutral	☐ Somewhat Disagree	☐ Strongly Disagree
Organizational skills	☐ Strongly Agree	☐ Somewhat Agree	☐ Neutral	☐ Somewhat Disagree	☐ Strongly Disagree
Communication	☐ Strongly Agree	☐ Somewhat Agree	☐ Neutral	☐ Somewhat Disagree	☐ Strongly Disagree
Other, specify:	☐ Strongly Agree	☐ Somewhat Agree	☐ Neutral	☐ Somewhat Disagree	☐ Strongly Disagree

Comments:

Appendix F – Employer Soft Skill Work Readiness Survey

2. In your experience, to what extent have youth display soft skills so far:

Teamwork	☐ Poor ☐ Fair ☐ Good ☐ Excellent
Critical Thinking	☐ Poor ☐ Fair ☐ Good ☐ Excellent
Communication	☐ Poor ☐ Fair ☐ Good ☐ Excellent
Flexibility	☐ Poor ☐ Fair ☐ Good ☐ Excellent
Interpersonal Skills	☐ Poor ☐ Fair ☐ Good ☐ Excellent
Leadership	☐ Poor ☐ Fair ☐ Good ☐ Excellent
Positive Attitude	☐ Poor ☐ Fair ☐ Good ☐ Excellent
Other, specify:	☐ Poor ☐ Fair ☐ Good ☐ Excellent
Comments:	

University of Pittsburgh | Institutional Review Board
Office of Research Protections

EXEMPT DETERMINATION

Date:	August 16, 2021
IRB:	STUDY21020155
PI:	Benjamin Wilson
Title:	Summer Jobs and More Soft Skills Evaluation Study
Funding:	None

The Institutional Review Board reviewed and determined the above referenced study meets the regulatory requirements for exempt research under 45 CFR 46.104.

Determination Documentation

Determination Date:	8/16/2021
Exempt Category:	(2)(ii) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation (low risk)
Approved Documents:	• Peer Counselors Focus Group Questions.docx, Category: Data Collection; • Employer and Staff Intro Scripts for The Summer JAM Program .docx, Category: Recruitment Materials; • Employer exemption Form , Category: IRB Protocol; • Student exemption form , Category: IRB Protocol;

If you have any questions, please contact the University of Pittsburgh IRB Coordinator, Larry Ivanco.

Please take a moment to complete our Satisfaction Survey *as we appreciate your feedback.*

Human Research Protection Office   3500 Fifth Avenue, Suite 106   Pittsburgh, PA 15213   www.hrpo.pitt.edu

Appendix G – Summer JAM On-Ramp Schedule

Summer JAM Orientation Work Readiness On-Ramp Training Schedule

Tuesday

9:30 AM – Welcome & Intro
9:40 AM – Keynote Speaker Gary Lee
9:50 AM –Peer Counselor Breakout Activity
10:15 AM – Break
10:30 AM – Soft Skills (recording)
11:00 AM – InSIte/Handbook
12:00 PM – Lunch Break
12:30 PM – HW Assignment
1:30 PM – COVID-19 Safety Complete Assignments
2:15 PM – Break
2:30 PM – County Executive
3:30 PM – Closing

Wednesday & Thursday

9:30 AM – Welcome & Intro
9:40 AM – Keynote Speaker Gary Lee
9:50 AM – Peer Counselor Breakout Activity
10:15 AM – Break
10:30 AM – Erie Insurance – How to be successful at work
11:00 AM – InSIte/Handbook
11:45 AM – HW Assignment
12:00 PM – Lunch Break
12:30 PM – COVID Safety
12:30 PM – COVID-19 Safety Complete Assignments
1:00 PM – Widget Financial – Financial Literacy
1:30 PM – Soft Skills (recording)
2:00 PM – Mayor Schember (recording)
3:00 PM – Closing