Youth workforce development is one of the most crucial issues facing society, especially for low-income minorities. The time of secondary school graduation is critical for integrating non-college-bound youth into the workforce and keeping them from becoming chronically unemployed, which disrupts the social fabric of society. Even for young people who may have benefited from educational reforms, it is necessary to convince an employer that one is qualified for an entry-level position, and the most important vehicle for doing this (at least in the US) is the employment interview.

In consultation with human resource (HR) professionals, our group developed a mock job interview for high school (HS) students (~ages 15-18). HR professionals in our project have conducted over 700 such interviews, all with low-income (mostly minority) youth living in Chicago. We draw data in this paper from the following sources: quantitative findings from a randomized controlled trial of the impact of a major program for HS youth on employability; observations of apprenticeship sessions operated by the program; debriefing (focus groups) of the HR interviewers; and findings from a pilot intervention to teach youth interview skills.

The HR interviewers, who are the gatekeepers into the world of work, gave us an unexpected insight: many of these youth had experiences and skills that are valuable to employers, but the youth themselves often had no idea that this was true and frequently did not successfully communicate those credentials in the mock job interview. The HR professionals were most concerned with a youth’s soft skills (interpersonal behavior and potential for effective teamwork, problem-solving, goal orientation, communication skills, etc.) rather than their specific educational achievements or hard (technical) skills. The HR perspective was that employers would be willing to teach the hard skills if the applicant brought in good soft skills.

The students believed that their experiences in school, the youth program, and other community settings were not employment relevant. Although the youth program was designed to provide marketable job skills, the program instructors rarely discussed the employment relevance of the experiences they provided. Unless they are explicitly told that they are learning actual job skills, teenagers will not know that. This is a major constraint on the potential for transferring human and social capital acquired in some institutional contexts to other contexts.

One approach to addressing this transfer problem on a policy level is to develop new programs that specifically address the transfer issue. To this end, we have developed and piloted a brief (6-session) educational curriculum to teach HS youth how to do well in interviews for internships and jobs. The intervention is implemented by regular school teachers, whom we train. Initial evaluation findings indicate that the intervention nearly tripled mock job hiring rates in pre to post mock job interviews conducted by HR professionals.