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Note: REDF seeks to regularly share learnings and critical updates it gathers from research organizations, subject matter experts, employment social enterprise (ESE) partners, and internal staff with the ESE field. This information seeks to offer timely insight to REDF staff and ESEs. This represents REDF's current thinking. However, REDF recognizes learnings can evolve over time. Insights such as these will be updated based on substantial new learnings and/or internal capacity.

Alumni Services Promising Practices

Introduction

Some Employment Social Enterprises (ESEs) are Extending Programming to Include Alumni Engagement and Services

REDF Community Employment Social Enterprises (ESEs) offer substantial supports to workers during the employment phase of their programming. But what happens after a worker has 'completed' a program? What is the range of programming that ESEs extend to their graduates to support them into the future months and years? How do different organizations conceptualize the transition from employee to alumni?

Fifteen social enterprises of varying scale and across a range of industries weighed in on these questions during a series of conversations with REDF. They defined alumni as individuals who had completed the supported employment phase of their program and, in a majority of cases, obtained competitive employment with another organization. REDF and most of the groups interviewed conceive of alumni supports as broader than retention supports and as a natural extension of the supportive services and professional development that ESEs provide to workers during supported employment. Nonetheless, use of the terms is inconsistent throughout the field. For our purposes:

- Retention services are narrower and more focused on helping individuals retain either a specific job or employment more generally. The primary beneficiary of retention services is the individual, though effective retention services may improve the satisfaction of employer partners and high aggregate retention numbers likely improve an ESE's reputation and fundraising ability. For any individual, the proactive retention services provided by an ESE are usually time limited, driven often by funder reporting requirements.
- Alumni services are broader, incorporating retention services but also extending beyond. At the heart of alumni services is connection to the ESE community,

consisting of staff, current workers, peers, alums, and sometimes partnering service providers or employers. Alumni services are offered across a range of channels, varying from formal communication and planned professional development events to casual community picnics and drop-ins. Individual graduates benefit from the sustained connection to their peers and ESE staff as well as from specific services offered, services most often focused on longer-term skill and career building. Importantly, current ESE workers and other alumni also benefit from former employees' experience and professional connections. In this way, ESE alumni services are not dissimilar from alumni services at universities and colleges.

Anecdotally, REDF has noticed that robust alumni services seem connected to better overall outcomes for individual participants, and by extension, improved aggregate outcomes. We wanted to explore the varied ways that ESEs build programs to offer former employees long-term connections and supports which enhance their personal and professional stability. What we heard from a subset of ESEs with more established alumni services were examples of strong alumni connections actually enhancing their ongoing employee supports and leading to the creation of stronger professional networks for program graduates. Although less frequent, we also heard that strong alumni connections could also build more employment opportunities for graduates. In this paper, we hope to explore the choices that these ESEs made to provide or to consider launching alumni services; the groups profiled here have decided that alumni services create value for their workers and their organizations. While not a prescriptive guide to building new programming, this paper will provide information to help you determine if these services are aligned with your organization's theory of change and examples of ways to implement promising practices should you decide that alumni services are a priority.

In the upcoming pages, we will provide information about the organizations interviewed in this project. Next, we will explore the various promising practices that we heard from ESEs, and ways that different organizations approached themes like communication, events, incentives, case management, and temporary employment. Finally, we will consider the benefits that ESEs reported because of offering these programs, and we will conclude with some ideas for fitting alumni services into overall programming.

Approach

REDF Interviewed a Diverse Set of ESEs to Learn about their Practices and Experience

To capture examples relevant to a broad array of ESEs, we spoke with organizations that had both informal and more structured approaches to alumni engagement. We focused

on organizations that had already initiated offering at least some alumni programming, engaging ESEs across a range of budget sizes, employee volume, and target populations. Our goal was to reflect the wide spectrum of alumni services being offered today, and to share some of the thinking that went into building these programs. In the appendix is a list of all the individuals we spoke to, their roles and organizational affiliations, as well as charts that categorize the interviews completed by organization budget, employee scale, and population served. Also included in the appendix is a checklist of the interventions detailed in this report, for those ESEs interested in launching their own alumni services programming.

Examples of Promising Practices

The Experience of ESEs Further Along in Implementation Can Inform ESEs Interested in Sustaining Connections With Their Own Alumni

Communication

ESEs with Alumni Services Programs Normalize Sustained Contact and Proactively Use a Variety of Methods to Stay in Touch

There are many ways that ESEs connect with and engage their alumni. A critical element to this programming is communication. How do ESEs stay in touch with their graduates? How do they keep their graduates informed of programs being offered and maintain current contact information? One overarching current from the organizations most deeply connected to their alumni was their consistent emphasis on long-term connection. Multiple ESEs shared that alumni relationships are first discussed at enrollment, so that new workers understand the long-term commitment they are making when they first connect to the organization. Program staff share that employment is one (early) stage of a worker's link to the ESE. They focus on building a long-term relationship with the worker where evolving interventions will continue to support the worker for years to come.

Most organizations that we interviewed have developed protocols for how frequently to contact alumni for data collection and provision of retention services. A majority of organizations interviewed initiate contacts based on a funder-mandated reporting schedule of one-, three-, six- months, and one year. First contacts will be attempted by phone calls and text messages, sometimes followed by home/neighborhood visits and outreach to a 'lifeline' contact, which was collected upon program enrollment. During these check-ins, retention specialists or case managers often verify employment data and check-in with alumni to see if there are additional ways that they might need support, be it housing, childcare, transportation assistance or mental health referrals.

In addition to this 1:1 outreach, multiple organizations we spoke with maintain social media channels, including Facebook groups, Instagram pages and WhatsApp message lists. These channels are used mainly for information dissemination about upcoming events. A subset of organizations also sends regular messages with job postings to all alumni. Several organizations send newsletters (either monthly or quarterly) through email or by text and in one case, track whether these newsletters are opened as a proxy for current alumni engagement.¹

One ESE with a technology focus took this a step further, providing all its employees with a lifetime email address (through google apps for education). Hopeworks (Camden, NJ) sends all its correspondence to this email address. In addition to providing participants with a stable email account, similar to what many college graduates have, Hopeworks can track the most recent log-in times on the email accounts. If a graduate has been unresponsive, Hopeworks will still know if they are checking their email accounts. Using their mailchimp software, they can also assess what newsletter content has generated the most interest among alumni.

The Doe Fund (New York, NY) creates opportunities for program participants to communicate with staff via email and social media throughout their program involvement. By normalizing the use of email and social media to discuss simple topics (like attendance issues) and complex ones (a RAP sheet consultation), alumni are more prepared to keep in touch using these channels when needs arise post program.

It is not unusual for alumni to fall out of contact. Some ESEs try to leverage externally-created opportunities to reinitiate dialogue. ESEs may receive calls during tax season from former employees who have relocated and changed contact information and are looking for their W-2s. Many states notify former employers when a worker files for unemployment insurance. Program staff can ask finance and HR staff to make note of new contact information and let the program team know when they receive such calls or notifications. These are opportune moments to reconnect with alumni as they may be particularly open to encouragement or services.

Having an open-door policy was universal across the ESEs interviewed, and many of the leaders we spoke with shared that alumni would regularly return to visit, either to share positive news or to ask for specific help when needed. Encouraging a long-term relationship from the outset, by telling new employees that they are always welcome back, sets the stage for periodic drop-ins, calls or texts. Alumni who make impromptu visits are often asked to speak with current employees about their experiences and

¹ Systems mentioned for correspondence include mailchimp and Constant Contact.

share encouragement. Through these spontaneous interactions, ESEs are often able to get updates on other alumni with whom the visitor is still connected. A majority of ESEs interviewed capture the conversation highlights in the client notes portion of their data management systems.

Social events

Opportunities To Socialize with Peers and Staff Can Help Alumni Stay Connected

While not every ESE has the capacity to organize regular social events, the ones that hosted annual or bi-annual picnics or awards dinners reported that these fostered an ongoing sense of community. A focal point of these events is food, and occasionally attendees are given gift cards as a thank you for their attendance (more on this in the incentives section). For organizations focused on single mothers or families, events are designed to accommodate or entertain children, and locations are chosen to be easily accessible by public transit.

Several smaller ESEs found ways to leverage existing events to include alumni, providing further opportunities for alumni to engage with current workers. At Community Kitchen Pittsburgh (CKP, Pittsburgh, PA) training cycles intentionally overlap for a week; the new SE employees witness the success of the current cycle of graduates and hear an alumni speaker a week after they enroll with the ESE. The Doe Fund gives present program participants a role in the social events it hosts, so that graduates have built in opportunities to coach and advise them. Another approach that Project Return (Nashville, TN) has adopted is to offer a single annual event for both current employees and alumni. Project Return provides employment services and transitional employment to individuals who were recently incarcerated. Their annual Freedom Field Day provides an opportunity for everyone to gather to celebrate freedom and fellowship together, with friends and families. Having a singular touchstone event creates an annual opportunity to reconnect with alumni and build community.

To create regular opportunities for alumni to interact, Hopeworks opened the Cohen Technology Center across from its main office space in May 2021. Since that time, they have seen many young alumni use the space as a co-working space, saving them from working remotely without privacy in often over-crowded apartments. It has evolved into a meeting space where the organization hosts social gatherings approximately every month – movie nights, game nights, and dinners all occur there, in addition to virtual school, meetings, job searches and ping pong tournaments. The availability of this space is known to alumni, and since opening, graduate drop-ins have become commonplace. The informal interactions between alumni using the space helps build

community among alumni and offers spontaneous mentoring around work and personal lives.

Skill-building Opportunities

ESEs Invite Alumni to Trainings and Events that Support Their Professional Development

Offering either one workshop or a series of workshops on a range of topics has been a way multiple ESEs interviewed bring alumni back and keep them focused on their own professional and personal development. In one formal incarnation, The Doe Fund offers its alumni access to multiple certifications and occupational training programs to continue building their professional skills. Smaller organizations, including the Challenge Program (Wilmington, DE) offer short-term certification classes to former crew members to increase their marketability. Other organizations, such as Hopeworks, offer access to a monthly workshop on a topic of general interest, including financial management, mental health, or career growth. In addition, they offer an hour-long professional development session for alumni to listen to partners talk about their career journeys and ask questions. Many of the ESEs hosting these events pair them with free food and childcare, to reduce potential obstacles to participation.

Similar to the way smaller ESEs leverage social events across current employees and alumni, some ESEs with fewer alumni have found ways to offer professional development without expending additional resources. CKP extended their monthly chef talks, which had been for current employees, to alumni as well. Now everyone gets to benefit from hearing professionals discuss their career pathways and the outlook for their businesses.

The ESEs that offer skill-building for their graduates emphasized how critical it is to match the content of these sessions to the needs and interests of their alumni. Some organizations do this informally, based on the topics that alumni raise when they reach out; others have had alumni boards or focus groups and surveys to discern what supports would be most valuable. Without the connection between alumni and services offered, no amount of programming will draw alumni back. For example, alumni with growing incomes may be attracted to programming relevant to financial management or aspirations like car ownership or securing their own apartment. The Doe Fund was emphatic about the benefits of supporting alumni even as they transition to new occupations or industries; part of its programming allows employees to work in the social enterprise during the day and attend classes in the evening to bridge skill building in new fields. Committing to ongoing growth of program participants is part of their organizational culture. A refrain at graduation is “Doe Fund for life!”

Another approach to creating a long-term relationship with alumni through skill-building is by creating career advancement opportunities within the social enterprise. Doing so requires scale, but it can offer opportunities to the employee who is invested in becoming a supervisor within the SE, rather than wanting to seek employment elsewhere. CEO (New York, NY; 31 cities, 12 states) has prioritized looking at its SE management structure to create opportunities for career growth amongst its high performing team members. They have constructed two programs to do this. A Crew Coach position orients existing team members to the role of crew manager and allows them to take on substitute roles as site supervisors to gain management experience. Its Emerging Leaders Program is a longer-term cohort-based training program that provides training to individuals that have successfully completed some portion of CEO's transitional employment program.

A different way to help alumni build skills is to support them as they do it, rather than offering the training directly. More Than Words (Boston, MA) works with transition age youth and connects with its alumni for a minimum of two years. During this time, they contact graduates at least once a month, with a goal of building a connection for the long-term. This year they will launch a new program of bridge funding that will subsidize expenses for alumni enrolling in training programs. More Than Words hopes to award 20-30 graduates small grants so that they can afford to complete skill-building programs that will result in higher earnings long-term. Internally called "rich uncle" funding, these awards will cover expenses that could otherwise prevent someone from enrolling in or completing training programs. The new grant program differs from scholarships for tuition. By offering "rich uncle" support to individuals whose networks don't include one, alumni can focus on learning rather than working to pay expenses while also enrolled in school.

Incentives

A Subset of ESEs Use Financial Incentives to Maintain Contact, Provide Support, or Recognize Contributions or Achievements

One topic that came up frequently in conversations about alumni services was the use (or not) of incentives. At some point, incentives have been offered by the majority of ESEs interviewed during this project. Incentives ranged from transportation vouchers and modest gift cards to cash bonuses for providing retention verification. Women's Bean Project (Denver, CO) extended its incentives for responding to staff outreach from the \$50 cards it offered at six- and twelve-month anniversaries of graduation to \$75 at 18 months and \$100 at two years. After extending the timeline of its incentives, Women's Bean saw their response rate for retention data go from 20 to 80 percent. In

this case, incentives are being used as a means of thanking alumni for providing retention information to the ESE, which helps the ESE to fulfill their reporting obligation to funders but may not provide direct benefit to the alumni. Incentives also played a role in making retention tracking less time intensive, as alumni responsiveness improves with financial rewards.

Other ESEs using incentives saw them as a means of valuing the time of their alumni and recognizing the opportunity cost for them to attend an ESE event. In some cases, incentives were offered to recognize the contribution that an alumnus had made (e.g., speaking to a group of current employees) that went above and beyond the norm.

Among the ESEs we spoke with, incentives were not regularly offered to alumni who attended social events, as these were seen as community-building and intrinsically rewarding for participants. Striking a balance between supporting alumni and not creating a transactional relationship was a topic raised by multiple organizations interviewed. One ESE reframed its retention incentive to be an extension of supportive services. Instead of telling alumni that they could expect \$200 per month when they shared evidence for each of their first five months of employment, the Doe Fund reframed the funds as an earning supplement. The funds were no longer rewarding job retention but enabling alumni to stay employed. Like hiring bonuses at prestige firms, the resources from Doe Fund are recognition of the additional expenses often incurred when starting a job. Staff found this reframing resulted in stronger relationships with alumni.

Ongoing Case Management/Coaching

ESEs Extend Guidance and Support from Staff Members to Varying Degrees, Reflecting Both Their Approach and Organizational Capacity

A consistent thread through a subset of the ESEs interviewed was that alumni programming must be integrated from the beginning of an individual's involvement in the organization. Part of the work of staff engaging with graduates (and earlier, with employees) is to normalize the return of graduates. At Cara Collective (Chicago, IL) they frame their alumni supports as coaching, rather than case management, and they put the onus on the alumni to partner in building a professional development plan. In this ESE's alumni programming, the alumni sign a contract prior to their graduation, and the coach's role is to create accountability for the goals that the alumni set themselves. From the beginning of a worker's hiring, the ESE makes it clear that this is just the first stage of their involvement work together.

While not all ESEs offering alumni services are able to dedicate staffing to it, all have intentionally carved out some resources, whether a percentage of a staff member's time or funds distributed as incentives or work supports. Being intentional and committing to providing alumni services can help ESEs balance competing priorities between current workers and alumni. Fewer than half of the ESEs we spoke to have staff who work exclusively with alumni, and many reflected that case managers who provided employee supports during the clients' employment will often receive calls from former clients asking for specific assistance. These calls might result in referrals to other organizations (e.g. for mental health or housing assistance, when the ESE doesn't provide these) or to emergency financial support to avoid the escalation of small problems (e.g. need for a new tire, payment of a traffic ticket) into larger ones.

We wanted to explore how ESEs balance running an efficient business while also providing supports to their alumni community. One refrain we heard was that ESEs triage their retention caseloads to enable their staff to focus on the alumni who need the most support. The largest ESE that REDF interviewed, CEO, has designated staff to be Retention Specialists. Every newly employed graduate receives a text message or phone call after their first day on the job. Alumni are contacted again at the end of the first week. CEO staff considers the first 90 days critical to building the bond between alumni and Retention Specialists, not only because it's a transitional period in their alumni's lives, but also because it's the standard probationary period in the new workplace. Even with these dedicated personnel, there are more alumni than there is staff capacity to sustain regular communication. Prioritizing limited staff time to those alumni needing more support is a process that begins with case reviews prior to a worker completing their transitional employment experience. After the first three months in external employment, Retention Specialists focus on clients at greater risk of losing their jobs.²

Virtually all of the ESEs interviewed have some form of database for tracking current employees which many have expanded to track alumni as well. ESEs will input status updates on alumni, track employment and retention, and record all correspondence and attempts at outreach. Several ESEs mentioned the value of Salesforce's automated reminders of when to follow-up with alumni, based on their last interaction with them, and used reports on alumni to manage caseloads across staff.

² CEO has noted that three attributes are associated with an increase in potential job loss. These are: 1. If a graduate is making relatively low wages; 2. If CEO played a large role in finding the job placement, rather than the graduate finding it themselves; 3. If the graduate is younger/newer to the workforce.

Structuring and Resourcing Alumni Services

Creative Approaches Have Made It Possible for Even Smaller ESEs to Offer Services to Alumni

Running a successful business and offering employment supports are both resource intensive activities. How can alumni services be integrated into the work of an organization that lacks the funding or scale to hire devoted Retention Specialists or Alumni Caseworkers? What happens as an ESE grows and is able to hire additional staff? Where do handoffs occur and when do follow-up responsibilities move between departments?

All of these were questions we posed to our interviewees. Several smaller organizations spoke of the relationships that they have built with community partners to extend capacity. For instance, CKP has noticed that its graduates need more support than it can realistically provide. To provide this support, it is partnering with another Pittsburgh-based organization, Foundation of Hope. Foundation of Hope will help CKP to set up a peer mentoring program to provide ongoing support to alumni who have mental health issues or who have experienced trauma. By building this partnership, CKP can offer a resource its alumni have sought without over-extending its current staff capacity. Similarly, More Than Words has Career Services Managers who will work with alumni on education and employment plans, but if someone needs help with housing or financial literacy skills, they are referred to partners. Recognizing the limits of organizational expertise and building collaborations with other entities is a way to build capacity externally.

Another way to build capacity is to do away with a traditional caseload model. While the majority of ESEs we spoke with have caseworkers assigned to specific employees (and later alumni), Project Return has chosen a more fluid caseload model. It has eight coordinators working with all its employees in Program Services, and another 3 coordinators working with its retention participants. When someone needs assistance, they can speak with anyone at Project Return. Every conversation is documented so that one coordinator can pick up a conversation where another left off. The goal is that each employee builds a relationship with multiple staff, and with Project Return as a whole. The investment is in building the community of Project Return, rather than individual relationships with staff members who may themselves eventually move on to other employment opportunities. In addition to building a strong community, it helps connect employees with support immediately, because they can be served by any of the staff who are available at that time.

Hopeworks chose to implement a different structure around its alumni services. It has a small group of caseworkers who support the youth employed by the social enterprise, and these same individuals also work with alumni. But it also has one specialized role to support alumni who are interested in continuing education, including navigating financial aid, choosing certificate programs, etc., and another (Assistant Director of Workforce Solutions) who coordinates alumni events, maintains communication, connects with employers and plans professional development sessions. This structure has enabled staff working with clients to develop strong relationships while deepening the organization's breadth of services and links to partners. It also acknowledges that certain types of alumni services may require more specific knowledge, that can be found through other in-house experts or community partners.

The Doe Fund combined the roles of program and retention staff, creating the Career Development and Graduate Services Instructor position. This new staff person enabled them to provide a similar engagement structure for alumni as they already have in place for graduates. Many of the resources, training opportunities and events are shared with both participants and alumni. Restructuring has allowed staff to see alumni as an active part of present caseloads, rather than something extra.

There are numerous successful models for working with ESE alumni long-term. A constant thread across programs is that they are responsive to the expressed and demonstrated needs of their participant workers, and that they are open to exploring different operational models as they grow. Many of these models give participants and alumni a role in developing the programs that will offer them support long-term, whether through involvement in focus groups, advisory boards, or ongoing conversations with staff.

Temporary Employment

ESEs Offering Temporary Employment to Alumni Find Benefits for Both the Worker and Their Program

Temporary employment is a support that a majority of the ESEs interviewed offer to alumni. Whether it is a few hours a graduate spends volunteering in their SE to reconnect with current employees and be in a safe space, or paid work for multiple weeks during a transition between jobs, the ESEs reported that keeping the employment door open to graduates was beneficial on multiple fronts. Alumni build pride while sharing their stories with current employees and offer encouragement to employees who are just starting out. The alumni also avoid financial hardship by continuing to earn an income during transitional periods. They continue to hone their work skills while avoiding gaps in their employment history. Alumni who have been

terminated from competitive employment can also work with an ESE staff person to define ways to avoid termination in the future; the opportunity to have that conversation is created when the ESE offers alumni the reason to come back.

The ESEs can reserve specific discrete projects for times when alumni reappear or extend temporary opportunities when surges in work occur periodically. Several youth-serving ESEs expressed that offering short-term work projects enabled them to remain connected with alumni for extended periods of time, helping the graduates to establish more stable personal situations (whether it's housing, healthy relationships, or long-term academic plans) during the years of substantial transition in early adulthood.

Building Employer Connections

Several ESEs with large numbers of alumni have developed processes to connect alumni who might be working for the same employer. When alumni report their employment status, the database will display that they are not the only graduate working at a specific site. The retention specialist or case manager will then connect the current and new employee in a text chain, to establish peer support at the new workplace. Similarly, some ESEs reported using alumni to find out additional information about local employers to ascertain if specific job opportunities might be a fit for recent graduates. Leveraging alumni contacts at employers came up repeatedly among ESEs with large alumni pools.

Another approach that one smaller ESE adopted to leverage alumni relationships and strengthen employer connections was to recognize alumni hiring new alumni. Each year, CKP recognizes the alumni/employer who has hired the most CKP graduates. This gives the employer that alumni are working for visibility and deepens connections that CKP can use for future hiring. In its monthly 'Chef Talk' professional development series, CKP also provides employers a chance to meet informally with its current employees. These early connections can help current ESE employees to build confidence speaking with employers and make their eventual job search less intimidating.

On the operational side, some ESEs with more developed data management systems tracked employer information and used this in conjunction with alumni data to assess patterns in employment among graduates. Placement specialists can see notes from other staff on alumni experiences with different employers, helping them to assess which competitive employers might be a good fit for their future graduates.

Potential Impact of Alumni Services (anecdotal)

Alumni Services Benefit Alumni, Current ESE Workers, and the Organization

During our conversations with ESEs with more robust alumni services, many reflected on the value that alumni supports ultimately yield their current employees and programs. One leader at CEO remarked that long-term retention data can tell the story of your program in a way that short-term placement data will not. While initial placement data shows an individual's hire-ability, only long-term data can capture the multiple steps forward and occasional steps back that regularly occur as someone transitions from one lifestyle pattern to another. Long-term retention results demonstrate an ESE's ability to support its alumni with steady and strong engagement efforts through each stage of an individual's personal and professional development. The long-term retention data, with its inevitable blips of unemployment and periods of training, is a more honest reflection of the indirect path that most individuals hired by social enterprises need to take to become stable.

CEO has moved away from using the term "alumni" to "participant", to emphasize the expectation of a long-term relationship between the employee and the ESE, and not wanting to mark the end of an employment relationship as the end of their working relationship altogether. To that end, they offer continued 1:1 services and leadership and development coaching. Instead of group alumni events, they host celebration events. These dinners and lunches recognize the achievements of all those individuals working in an unsubsidized job and celebrate their success with food and raffle prizes. At the same time, they use these events to collect paystubs and update records.

When we asked Dan Rhoton, Executive Director of Hopeworks, how his ESE can stay connected to their thousands of alumni without exhausting organizational resources, he spoke about the amount that alumni give back. Instead of looking at the costs created for Hopeworks to support alumni, he talked about how much the organization gains from alumni contributions. In Hopeworks' experience, the first three to six months after obtaining competitive employment are the most time intensive in its work with alumni. After that, as alumni become more stable in their work, they become a resource for current employees. Whether as speakers, mentors, contacts at employer sites or sources of encouragement, Hopeworks alumni create a network to support future program graduates.

The value of networks and community building came up frequently. Bob White, Chief Program Officer at Cara Collective, talked about the critical work of building a community for its graduates. Cara is focused on developing connections between its alumni, so that its network can support graduates in the same way that an academic institution or fraternity alumni network supports its members. If the employees entered the ESE as more marginalized members of society, Cara offered them a chance to build

a new network that affords them greater resources and opportunities. During the year that CARA offers formalized retention supports and scheduled check-in, staff forge a strong relationship as they help workers navigate sustaining a job over the course of four seasons, including setting up childcare for summers and planning commutes in snowy months. Cara also helps alumni build relationships with each other, for instance by using alumni to offer mock interviews for job-seeking alumni. They encourage alumni to use these connections in their job search, just as a university alumni would reach out to an earlier class about job opportunities.

At The Doe Fund, one of the largest ESEs in REDF's current portfolio, Felipe Vargas, VP of Programs and John Powell, Director for Career Development and Graduate Services shared the way that they had recently reformulated programming to create an expectation of long-term engagement with their organization. Instead of framing graduation as completion, The Doe Fund positions it as the first of many steps and offers their career development and graduate services as supports to assist alumni with all the upcoming transitions in their lives. By normalizing issues that the Doe Fund anticipates many of its graduates will experience, it encourages open communication. It has realized that it is more effective to support an individual's ability *to be employable* than to support their ability *to gain employment*. Inherent in this approach is the assumption that the job market and other factors are dynamic. Having a program that individuals can access at any point within the continuum of services allows alumni to clearly identify where they need to go to address a specific need or receive a referral. The Doe Fund has expanded its upskilling programs and extended hours to meet the needs of the graduates interested in continual reskilling. It uses the expressed and observed needs of its alumni to inform the addition or expansion of programming. They have found that the best way of maintaining a strong connection with alumni has been to align the resources being offered to the goals of the individual, for example, family reunification. Alumni services are not an afterthought – they are fleshed out as clearly as initial program services.

Conclusions

Alumni Services Have Evolved To Meet the Reality of Workers Journeys Out of Poverty. Start Up of New Services Should be Informed by the Experience of Graduates

A theme that recurred throughout our ESE interviews was the changing nature of how organizations thought about their work with employees and alumni. Many described how they had evolved from thinking of their relationship with individuals as linear to seeing it as cyclical. They shared how they had seen their relationship in stages; as an employer, then as supporting a job candidate, and then tracking an alumnus. As time went on and they stayed in touch with their graduates, they realized that the true picture for many in their target population was less linear. Many employees needed to return for temporary employment between jobs. Alumni benefitted from the career coaching that they received from the ESE. Some alumni entered certification or post-secondary training programs as a result of their connection with the ESE; while studying, they came back to work to support themselves. Others lost housing and needed help locating additional resources. It was a cycle of two steps forward, one step back, over and over again.

By incorporating alumni services at the beginning of their work with new employees, ESEs normalized the cycle of individuals returning, and recognized their commitment to growth and professional development. ESEs could set the expectation with new hires that their relationship will be long-term, and that engagement in alumni services post-ESE employment will be just as important to their long-term success as employability supports and work experience are at the beginning of their journey. By designing alumni services based on feedback from participants and alumni, ESEs constructed programs to be responsive to critical needs.

The ESEs we interviewed shared innumerable programmatic innovations they had made based specifically on their observations of their alumni's lives after graduation. More than Words saw its alumni getting stuck in roles that weren't satisfying, because they didn't have the resources to take time off from work or reduce hours to go back to school. In response, it created its bridge funding program. Hopeworks witnessed its alumni lacking a safe, productive environment in which to work or attend remote school; they opened a co-working space, that has had the added benefit of encouraging informal meetings between alumni from different cohorts. In these examples and many others, we heard the way ESEs altered and extended programs to respond to specific challenges their alumni experienced.

We encourage other ESEs to consider what can be learned by reflecting on your own alumni trends. Where are alumni getting stuck? What resources might you possess that

could be extended to alumni without putting additional demands on staff? How could connections between current employees and alumni be encouraged, to build a stronger future network? Is there a longer-term approach that would support alumni as they progress along their paths, as windy and unpredictable as they may be?

As more organizations roll out alumni programming, we will deepen our knowledge of which promising practices yield the most significant impacts. With further data collection and longevity of these programs, we will have a clearer sense of which activities offer the greatest benefits to employees and graduates. In the future, we hope to offer an updated view of which evidence-based practices could work in the varied ESEs that make up the broader REDF Community.

Appendix

List of interviewees

| ESE Name | Person(s) Interviewed | Title |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| 1951 Coffee | Doug Hewitt | Founder/CEO |
| Beautiful Day | Rebecca Garland | Associate Director |
| Cara Collective | Bob White | Chief Program Officer |
| CEO | Johanna King Vespe | Senior Director, Program Services |
| Challenge Program | Andrew McKnight | Executive Director/Founder |
| Civic Works | Eli Allen | Senior Program Director |
| Community Kitchen Pittsburgh | Jennifer Flanagan | Executive Director/Founder |
| Global Neighborhood | Brent Hendricks | Executive Director |
| Hopeworks | Dan Rhoton, Grace Manning | Executive Director, Assistant Director of Workforce Solutions |
| More Than Words | Bobby Nasson | Director of Strategic Initiatives |
| MRC | Laura Robinson | Director of Development & Operations |
| New Moms | Dana Emanuel, Gabrielle Caverl-McNeal | Director of Learning & Innovation, Senior Director of Employment & Academic Coaching |
| Project Return | Larry Craig, Rachel Roberts | Director of Social Enterprise, Program Services Director |
| The Doe Fund | Felipe Vargas, John Powell, Alex Hunt | VP of Programs, Director for Career Development & Graduate Services, VP Business Development |
| Women's Bean Project | Tamra Ryan | CEO |

| Size of program (by # employed) | No. of interviewees | Industry sectors |
|---------------------------------|---------------------|---|
| 0-50 | 7 | Construction (green), manufacturing, food services, retail, agriculture |
| 51-250 | 5 | Manufacturing, technology, retail, maintenance |
| 251+ | 3 | Administrative, maintenance, landscaping |

| Primary Population served | No. of interviewees |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Opportunity Youth | 4 |
| Formerly Incarcerated | 3 |
| Formerly Homeless | 4 |
| Refugees | 4 |

Alumni Services Potential Interventions

This list of potential interventions and engagement strategies was culled from our conversations with ESEs. We are not suggesting that any organization must adopt **all** these approaches to have robust alumni programming. It is designed to generate ideas and provide examples of promising practices. When selecting from the list, reflect on what trends of successes and challenges are present in your alumni community, and how these approaches might map onto existing programming to bolster alumni growth. Whenever possible, design alumni services with the input of current and future participants.

Before launching alumni services programming, it is worthwhile to codify the underlying assumptions of investing in these programs.

We want to maintain contact with ESE alumni beyond our mandated retention reporting

We believe that alumni services offer benefits that enrich our:

- Former workers
- Current ESE employees
- Organization as a whole

□

Communication Practices

We will initiate contacts with alumni on an established timeline of _____

We will attempt to reach alumni by phone calls, emails, and text messages

We will conduct home/neighborhood visits to reach out-of-touch alumni (under these circumstances _____)

We will collect lifeline contact information from our alumni, and follow-up with these contacts when alumni are unresponsive

We will maintain these social media channels for distribution of information of general interest to our alumni, with _____ frequency

We will send regular messages with job postings to all alumni

We will produce a newsletter and send to alumni on a _____ basis

We will provide alumni with a lifetime email address

We will ensure that HR and finance departments capture updated alumni contact information and inform program team members when notified about unemployment claims or contacted for tax information; we will use this information and these moments in time to re-engage alumni whenever possible.

We will maintain an open-door policy for alumni to return

Social Events

- We will host a(n) _____ event to celebrate alumni
- All alumni events will be planned to accommodate the families of the alumni (either through childcare provision or stipends, or by programming for children)
- Alumni events will be scheduled to build connections between current workers and alumni
- If space is available, we will provide alumni access to space for future remote work, study or job searches

Skill Building

- We will develop workshop(s) that support alumni personal and/or professional development
- We will facilitate alumni access of certifications and occupational training programs
- We will invite alumni to return for industry presentations to current workers
- We will build programming to match the expressed needs and goals of alumni
- We will build career advancement opportunities within our social enterprise
- We will offer financial support to alumni pursuing further education and training

Incentives/ Temporary Employment

- We will provide financial incentives to alumni providing retention data (at this level \$_____, with this frequency _____)
- We will offer incentives as an earning supplement in the first _____ months of an alumni's competitive employment
- We will offer incentives to alumni who present on behalf of our ESE, serving on an advisory board, etc.
- We will offer paid work opportunities to alumni during life transitions

Ongoing Case Management/Coaching

- We will help workers to build personal and professional development plans prior to graduation
- We will have alumni sign a contract prior to graduation, to create accountability for carrying out their plan
- We will provide referrals to alumni when they require services which our ESE doesn't offer
- We will provide emergency financial support to help alumni avoid bigger expenses
- We will triage our retention caseloads to provide the most attention to the alumni who are in the greatest need
- We will develop/maintain a database for tracking alumni interactions and employment
- We will utilize database automated reminders to help maintain regular contact with alumni

Structuring and Resourcing Alumni Services

- We will engage alumni to inform ESE programming
- We will build relationships with community partners to extend capacity
- We will adopt a fluid caseload model to provide more immediate support to alumni
- We will create organizational roles to build in-house expertise in specific areas (e.g. education, employment support roles)
- We will build an expectation for long-term engagement into our initial intake materials, so that alumni relationships are defined as critical to our community from the time of enrollment

Building Employer Connections

- We will connect alumni working at the same employer to build peer support
- We will solicit feedback from alumni on employer culture, and build knowledge of employers to support job placement of future graduates
- We will recognize employers for hiring groups of alumni
- We will recognize alumni who are employers hiring other alumni
- We will offer alumni an opportunity to speak to recent alumni and current workers