Youth Opportunity Program: Training for the Future, Manpower for Today

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One of the highest rates of unemployment in this country occurs among young people who have dropped out of high school or who have graduated high school but are not college-bound. In response to an accelerating high school dropout rate, increasing unemployment, and the many social problems facing young people, New York State, in 1967, implemented a program aimed at maintaining students in school and at the same time providing job training opportunities. Known as the Youth Opportunity Program, it was sponsored by the New York State Department of Mental Hygiene and was administered at several mental health facilities throughout the state.

For all programs in New York State, after careful screening and evaluation by full-time staff assigned to the hospitals, each student is placed in a specific job assignment. An attempt is made to assign students to specific jobs on the basis of their interests and career orientation. In those cases where the counselors determine, on the basis of a two-hour screening interview, that the student's abilities do not meet the requirements of the position requested, an attempt is made to find another acceptable placement more in tune with the student's interests and ability. The program is flexible in that the student may request a change of assignment if the original assignment does not meet his/her needs or expectations. Students who show continuous dissatisfaction with several agreed-upon job placements will then receive special job counseling. Thus, the assignment of students to clinical, support, or clerical positions is based primarily on students' expressed interests. Those interested in direct patient contact are placed in clinical positions; those interested in developing manual skills are placed in support positions; and those interested in developing office skills are placed in clerical positions. Students spend an average of two years in the program, usually until they graduate. Most students remain at the same, or similar, job assignments during
this period, giving them a degree of job stability and enabling them to learn specific work skills. Students are given jobs similar to those of regular employees, and they share many of the same responsibilities of regular staff.

One of the first participants in the program was Central Islip Psychiatric Center, located in a suburban area of Long Island, 60 miles from New York City. The students in the program have been drawn primarily from the Central Islip, East Islip, and Brentwood high schools and are from low-income families. Each student works at the hospital 20 hours a week during the academic year and increases this to 32 hours a week during summer recess. They are all paid the standard state minimum wage. Students must be at least 16 years of age or older to participate in the program.

The program at Central Islip Psychiatric Center is unique in that it also provides counseling, guidance, and assistance to the students concerning their personal lives. This aspect of the program, which has been expanded to provide these services to graduates of the program, includes career and employment assistance.

A very important and vital aspect of the program is the role and function of the two Youth Opportunity Program Supervisors, both of whom have a long association with the hospital and experience in recreation and rehabilitation. Both have been with the program almost since its beginning. They serve not only as monitors and coordinators of the program, but as big brothers, surrogate fathers, and sympathetic and understanding individuals. They counsel students for both personal and work-related problems and meet with all students on a weekly basis.

Each participant is evaluated by his/her work-site supervisor every three months, and the evaluation is discussed with the student by the Youth Opportunity Program Coordinators. Specific attention is paid to areas of unsatisfactory performance, and the students are counseled as to how to improve their work performance. In addition, the students and the counselors participate in weekly socialization and recreation groups. This program has been expanded to serve graduates, as well as those currently participating. The heavy emphasis on counseling, the development of close interpersonal relationships between students and counselors, and the continuation of the relationship with the students after they have completed the program make the Central Islip program unique among those within the state.

The purpose of the present report is to analyze the results of the 10 years of the program's existence and to determine how effective the program has been in retaining students and assisting them toward educational and work careers.

DESCRIPTION OF PARTICIPANTS

Between 1967 and 1977 (through June 1978—the end of the academic year), 684 students have participated in the Central Islip Youth Opportunity Program—an average of 68 students per year. Of these, 47% (321) were male and 53% (363) female. Thirty-seven percent of the students were black, 41% white, and 22% Hispanic, which is representative of the geographic areas