

# Integrating a Racial and Ethnic Equity Lens into Workforce Development Training for Young Adults

Hannah Lantos, Sam Hanft, Alex DeMand, Zakia Redd, and Kristin A. Moore

## Introduction

The majority of youth and young adults in the United States who are out of work [are youth of color](#). To better reach and support all participants, many workforce development programs are increasingly embedding a racial and ethnic equity and inclusion (REEI) approach into job skills training initiatives.

The literature is [limited](#) on whether [training staff](#) to explicitly address interpersonal racism, [implicit bias](#), and [structural racism](#)<sup>1</sup> can lead to better outcomes for young people of color. This literature does not suggest that trainings may have a negative effect, but rather that additional, ongoing support is needed to see positive changes. While many programs are committing to increasing their staff members' knowledge and comfort with navigating challenging conversations through [training opportunities](#) or more intensive, multi-year strategies, it is becoming clear that training must be accompanied by [ongoing supports and policy changes](#) (e.g., hiring and supervision policies that ensure programs are inclusive and equitable).

In the broader Generation Work initiative (see textbox), REEI has been a key area of focus and complements the initiative's emphasis on positive youth development (PYD)—a strengths-based approach that elevates the voices and builds the skills and social capital of young people—and employer engagement. While programs that integrate PYD may effectively create welcoming spaces for young people of color, an intentional focus on embedding REEI strategies is also necessary. This allows programs to directly address interpersonal and structural racism and to ensure that their PYD approach is supported by the policies and systems in place within the organization.

<sup>1</sup> For this report, we use a definition of structural racism from the Aspen Institute. They write: "We use the term structural racism to define the many factors that contribute to and facilitate the maintenance of racial inequities in the United States today. A structural racism analytical framework identifies aspects of our history and culture that have allowed the privileges associated with "whiteness" and the disadvantages associated with "color" to endure and adapt over time. It points out the ways in which public policies and institutional practices contribute to inequitable racial outcomes. It lays out assumptions and stereotypes that are embedded in our culture that, in effect, legitimize racial disparities, and it illuminates the ways in which progress toward racial equity is undermined." See here: <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/structural-racism-youth-development-issues-challenges-implications/>

## Generation Work

Launched by the Annie E. Casey Foundation in 2015, Generation Work™ aims to connect more of America's young adults with meaningful employment by changing the way public and private systems prepare them for jobs. As part of the initiative, partners in five sites across the nation—Cleveland, Hartford, Indianapolis, Philadelphia, and Seattle—are working to align various education, employment, and support services to help young people develop the skills required to succeed in the working world; link them with employers; and increase advancement and earning opportunities.

By combining employer-facing strategies that are aligned to labor market needs with positive youth development techniques—such as hands-on learning and mentoring—the initiative aims to blend services into more cohesive pathways that promote equitable employment opportunities for all young people.

This brief explores how one local partnership in the Generation Work initiative, led by the Goodwill of Central and Southern Indiana (GCSI)—and specifically its Excel Center® adult high schools—rolled out REEI training for its staff throughout the organization as part of its recognition that PYD approaches would have limited reach without more explicit REEI work. To inform this brief, Child Trends researchers conducted 10 interviews during an October 2019 site visit with staff from both [GCSI](#), which runs [The Excel Centers](#), and [EmployIndy](#), which is the local [Workforce Development Board](#).

Since the interviews, the [national conversation](#) about race and racism in the United States has changed. At Goodwill, this change in public perception has spurred more motivation for change within the organization. Nationally, the progress made has been driven primarily by a reawakened racial justice movement inspired by a series of widely shared recordings of racist incidents against Black people. [Increasing levels of support for the Black Lives Matter movement](#) make clear that programs now seeking to prioritize racial justice work may find useful lessons from Goodwill's experience in Indianapolis and from the step-by-step process they undertook over many months.

At the end of this case study, we briefly share updates of the Indianapolis partnership's work, but it is important to place this case study in its rightful place—in the midst of a larger, ongoing process. The case study captures a moment in time within a longer, transformative process with which Goodwill has engaged. These findings should be interpreted not as the final point in the partnership's efforts to incorporate a more robust REEI lens, but as one step of the process.

## Key findings

- **Champions within the organization were necessary for advancing discussions about race equity.** A small group of committed employees drove ongoing conversations about—and support for—racial equity work, while also promoting and leading opportunities for training. Their efforts were essential in helping more people at Goodwill feel comfortable discussing racism and racial equity and become more willing to address it.
- **White staff members' reported experiences in the REEI trainings differed from those of their Black and Latino colleagues.** White participants tended to think very positively of the trainings across the board, while employees of color had more varied responses. It is important that employers support all staff to feel safe, no matter how they respond personally to the trainings. Staff may need space to navigate the emotions that the trainings bring up.
- **Few staff connected the training they received with how they support program participants.** Translating learnings from trainings to specific changes in practice likely requires conscious effort from organizations and employees, along with ongoing support to promote organizational change that aims to sustain changes in programmatic practices.
- **Following the trainings, staff members identified a need to increase employer engagement around the topic of racial equity as a clear next step.** Some staff members noted that this may remain an ongoing challenge: Many are hesitant to push conversations with employers around a variety of issues (but particularly those related to racial equity), for both personal and professional reasons.
- **Finally, while PYD is a valuable tool, it is not sufficient to address inequities driven by race and ethnicity.** While staff at the Excel Center® (alternative high schools run by GCSI) employ strong PYD approaches, most had never thought explicitly, prior to the trainings, about how to prepare participants to navigate or respond to racism in the workplace. Their PYD focus would be strengthened by explicitly equipping young people with the skills to choose for themselves how to respond to experiences of racism in the workplace.

# Context

## About positive youth development

Positive youth development (PYD) is an approach that encourages providers to focus on their clients' unique attributes. By adopting a PYD approach, programs commit to responding to young people's current circumstances and tailoring programming to the appropriate developmental stage of each participant, to the extent that they can. Repeatedly, practitioners refer to this as "meeting young people where they are." While this approach may seem difficult or resource-intensive, we have observed programs that focus on young people's individual needs, goals, and strengths as they help them successfully complete a program, training, or other initiative. Program staff can better meet the needs of individuals by developing positive relationships with young people; ensuring physically and emotionally safe environments; strengthening linkages between organizations, families, and communities; and improving youth's developmentally appropriate skills (that is, their soft skills as well as their academic and technical competencies).

Organizations may struggle to identify concrete ways to implement PYD approaches consistently for all participants. Many organizations report a desire for a PYD-specific training to offer their staff. However, a PYD approach requires nimble and creative thinking on the part of staff to "meet participants where they are," as well as an organizational culture that supports both staff and young people. This individualized approach is more complex than simply sending staff to a training and is more likely to engage young adults and achieve positive outcomes. PYD approaches and REEI approaches are [not the same thing](#). Specifically, to address disparities in services and outcomes by race or ethnicity, programs need to engage intentionally in an REEI approach that seeks to reduce racial disparities. PYD alone can support young people, but without an intentional REEI approach, PYD will likely fall short of reducing observed disparities by race. If organizations do not analyze how their policies and practices further embed or minimize disparities, it is often difficult for them to have a truly effective PYD approach. In Indianapolis, a large component of the partnership's efforts for the Generation Work project focused on taking an explicit REEI approach; this approach is the primary focus of this case study.

### Child Trends' Previous Generation Work Research

As a national research partner for Generation Work, Child Trends supports the Annie E. Casey Foundation in generating systematic knowledge about the use of PYD approaches in workforce training settings. For this purpose, we developed the [PILOT Assessment](#) in 2018, which is a self-reflection tool for workforce training staff. The first year of Generation Work emphasized five dimensions of PYD (defined in more detail in the full assessment, linked above):

- Positive Relationships
- Improved Skills
- Linkages Across School, Work, Families, and Communities
- Opportunities to Contribute and Belong
- Trustworthy and Safe Settings

During the development of the PILOT tool, we interviewed leadership and staff at the five local partnerships, as well as youth and young adult participants, to learn how the partnerships were integrating PYD into their work with young people. We found that each local partnership was already engaging in PYD practices that we felt would be useful to teach to other workforce training practitioners.

To expand on what we learned while developing the PILOT tool, we are completing five case studies to examine how each local partnership built certain pieces of its PYD approach.

## About this case study

This is one of five case studies that examine how local partnerships in the Generation Work initiative have scaled up and supported the use of PYD approaches in training programs for young people who seek high-quality training and employment. The case studies were sparked by the Annie E. Casey Foundation's interest in learning more about how the five local partnerships have integrated PYD approaches in workforce training settings for youth in order to generate systematic knowledge about PYD that other workforce training practitioners can apply. Specifically, this brief explores how an education/employment program with a focus on PYD came to recognize the relevance of structural racism and implement a REEI initiative.

## Generation Work in Indianapolis

Across the five partnerships in Generation Work, over three quarters of participants are Black or Hispanic. In the Indianapolis local partnership (the focus of this brief), Black and Hispanic youth and young adults make up 60 percent of participants in partnership programs, yet almost two thirds (65%) of program staff are White. This is important for two reasons: First, there is a need for programs to consider how imbalances of power fall along racial lines (both among staff but also between staff and participants) and how their hiring and staffing practices may either maintain or facilitate ongoing imbalances and inequities. Second, there is also a need among staff to better understand the experiences of their participants, and—when it comes to race—the ways in which those experiences may differ from their own experiences as adolescents and emerging adults. This can be important for both White staff and staff of color.

Many workforce program staff have long known that supporting participants not only requires helping them develop the [technical, non-technical, and socio-emotional skills](#) they need to succeed at work: It also means [connecting with them as individuals, developing positive and developmentally appropriate relationships](#), and helping them [overcome barriers](#) to success so that they can succeed in the program itself. Some workforce development programs are doing this by seeking to address structural inequities and preventing negative—and at times racist—interpersonal experiences that hamper participants' progress. When done well, these efforts can result in improved outcomes for [youth and young adults](#).

In particular, a small group of women—who would become leaders at Goodwill for its REEI work—began to think about REEI in their daily work. At the same time, the Annie E. Casey Foundation provided funds for more REEI work in Generation Work. Thus, the Generation Work program manager was able to use funds from her budget to send multiple staff members to external trainings, which spurred more conversation about what was needed at GCSI. By the end of 2019, more than 100 individuals across the partnership attended REEI trainings, including senior and executive staff from multiple partners throughout the city.

Attending these trainings helped staff identify three primary purposes for REEI training in this setting: Help staff better understand participants, help them develop more comfort in talking about issues related to racial identity and racism, and help them identify which internal processes within Goodwill needed changing. First, REEI training would help staff—both White staff and staff of color—understand the challenges that participants of color sometimes face. Without the lived experience of a person of color, White staff needed to better understand how their experiences differed from those of the youth and young adults they serve. Additionally, while many staff of color may be able to understand some challenges their participants face, their own internalized racism, different life experiences, and/or different beliefs can differentially impact their ability to connect with participants of all races or ethnicities. For example, program staff may be more likely to identify adolescents and emerging adults of color as “angry” or “hostile” when these young adults would benefit from staff who could empathetically support their identity-creation process. Second, many people are uncomfortable talking about racism. Traditionally, racism is discussed in professional settings in the context of either accusations of racism, or trainings *about* racism. Often, employers encourage a more “race-blind” approach in the workplace. The training at Goodwill aimed to

make people more comfortable talking about racial identities, as well as racism more explicitly. It called out how people's implicit biases and unconscious thinking allow them to make racialized judgements all the time, and identified that talking about racism and bias would give staff opportunities to learn, rather than shy away from conversations about race. Third, the trainings could help staff and leaders better identify which internal processes should change to make Goodwill a more equitable environment for staff and participants. However, training itself is likely insufficient; rather, ongoing support is important to change systems and encourage ongoing conversations. In similar efforts elsewhere, the lessons learned in trainings have [been found to wane over time](#).

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## Conducting the Indianapolis Case Study

For the Indianapolis case study, our decision to focus on REEI in the context of an employment/training program using PYD principles grew out of a conversation with the Generation Work program manager. This discussion provided us with updates on the partnership and helped identify topics related to PYD and young people's opportunities for growth that the partnership's leadership wanted to learn more about. Child Trends and the partnership also hoped that any identified topics would also be potentially useful to other cities; ultimately, we agreed that a case study of the REEI work in Indianapolis served these purposes well. Next, we identified key individuals to interview for the case study and planned a three-day site visit to conduct the interviews. The interviewees included staff involved with the Generation Work project at both Goodwill and EmployIndy, whose staff also participated in trainings.

We used a common interview protocol that we designed in consultation with the leadership of the Indianapolis local partnership. Interviews focused on REEI practices, the general progress of the work for Generation Work, and how the work was organized and had evolved over time. We employed a simple coding rubric that focused primarily on the work around race equity for this case study.

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## Findings

### Champions were critical in advancing discussions about race equity.

Three women—two from Goodwill's Nurse Family Partnership program and one from Generation Work; one White and two Black—were critical in expanding Goodwill's REEI work. All cared deeply about addressing inequities and, together, became champions for race equity work. All took on a leadership role within Goodwill, helping to lead new trainings, facilitate existing trainings, or participate in ongoing policy discussions. They played an essential role in educating their peers, coordinating trainings, and prioritizing the REEI work within Goodwill.

In their interviews, the women shared examples of experiences that made them understand the need to pay more attention to racial equity at Goodwill. One woman reached out to human resources (HR) to ask for clarification on whether any existing trainings had a specific racial equity focus. When HR told her that they did not have any initiatives focused explicitly on racial equity, she realized she would have to advance some racial equity work herself. This same woman shared how one simple policy within Goodwill has resulted in more negative outcomes: "There's nothing on any of our HR applications that says, '[I]f you need an interpreter, let us know.' That should be on everything, so then people don't feel singled out by having to ask for an interpreter." Even though Goodwill serves a large refugee population, the onus falls on participants to ask for help, which this woman knew made success less likely. Another woman observed bias on the part of medical providers. While she was able to support her clients and advocate for them as patients, she felt that the medical providers needed to understand patients' experiences and how these experiences related to poor health outcomes for both mothers and infants. Through their experiences and observations, the

women were motivated to encourage training among Goodwill staff and their organizational partners. They all were hopeful that creating a space to learn from one another would be a way to make progress.

Without champions or the necessary funding, it is hard to imagine that Goodwill's race equity work would have moved forward as quickly as it did. As each of the three women began to think about race equity issues, they sought opportunities to further train themselves, along with ways to regularly raise the topic of REEI at Goodwill to increase the capacity of their staff and colleagues. Ultimately, they were instrumental in bringing race equity trainings to Goodwill for staff. While Goodwill's leadership was supportive of race equity work and did not create major barriers (and, in fact, attended trainings themselves), a lack of support from leadership to build or sustain the work is a common challenge around REEI work in many organizations. As a result, initiatives are often not sustained, which was an initial concern for us when we first went to Indianapolis. While training is important, policy and organizational systems changes are needed to affect change in outcomes for young adults. Essentially, while it is important to understand a history of racism, outcomes are unlikely to change without changes in how organizations support race equity work. While our introduction noted that the evaluation literature on trainings is somewhat limited, much of the literature points out the ongoing need for additional support. Training is likely necessary, but remains insufficient if organization leaders do not commit ongoing support to continue to respond and adapt to the experiences of their staff and participants.

### **White staff members tended to find the trainings educational and moving, while staff of color reported more varied responses to the trainings.**

The trainings consisted of a multi-day workshop at which staff were encouraged to actively participate. Staff could choose from multiple dates to attend; shortly after our visit, all executive leadership staff had received training in REEI, which set the stage for ongoing conversations.

The experiences of White staff and staff of color varied in important ways. Specifically, most White staff members found the trainings to be positive experiences through which they learned new things about their communities and about Goodwill. One staff member said:

*I strengthened relationships with some of my colleagues during those two and a half days that I probably would not have had the opportunity, maybe ever, to—just because we're in different areas of the organization. So, from that perspective, it was really, really powerful, and also gave me deeper insight into how sort of my own colleagues are feeling, and kind of caused me to sort of check my own conscious or unconscious behavior or thoughts. I mean, it just really made you be really, really introspective, which is a good thing. And so, from that perspective, everybody needs to go through it.*

The sentiments in this quote—that the staff member learned more about their colleagues, gained perspective, challenged their thinking, and felt that everyone should experience similar training opportunities—were common among White participants. It was less common for White staff to explicitly note the need to continue dismantling structurally racist systems. However, one staff member did say this explicitly: “And an area that we're going to have to continue to think about is how do we help people debrief from that experience. Because it's just ... a lot.”

Staff members of color were more likely to note the need for ongoing work on REEI and more likely to acknowledge that these conversations are hard, stressful, or bring up emotions like fear and anxiety. Even staff of color who ultimately said that trainings were good shared these other mixed emotions. One staff member noted the difficulty of these conversations:

*I appreciate the approach that they took with it here in this region because it is a tough conversation to have, and they clearly understood that ... They addressed it ... in a way in which people can actually receive [the historical and systemic components of racism] and be reflective about it instead of immediately rejecting anything that they're hearing.*

But other staff members said that the experience was harder and more personal. One staff member noted that the training made her realize how much she had internalized that her role as a person of color was to not be noticed:

*I learned from that training that what I felt that I've just been taught since I was a child, 'Keep your mouth shut. Work hard. Don't ruffle any feathers' ... It brought on feelings [of] embarrassment, being ashamed of the person that I've been my whole life, some animosity. But I guess most of all, it brought about awareness.*

While this staff member noted that the trainings had made her more aware, she also wished she'd been given warning about what the training would cover so that she could prepare:

*Something in the training that I wish that could have been covered ... was actually sort of an introduction of what people were going to be getting themselves into. Because I was in this room with co-workers. And I was very vulnerable, and I shared some things that I regretted sharing afterwards. Because although we're told we're in a safe space and nothing leaves this room, that's not guaranteed.*

This same respondent expressed confusion about whether her willingness to be vulnerable was of value to her White colleagues. She noted to us that she felt relief when a post-workshop debrief with her coworkers was canceled, because she was nervous about discussing these topics again and unsure whether her sharing had been useful to anyone.

Other staff of color noted that their White colleagues tokenized them during the conversation. One person said:

*And then it got to the point too where the White co-workers were asking basic questions. But then they would look to me and the other Black lady and say, 'Well, have you experienced this?' And I had to say, 'Well, we can't speak for every Black person within the Goodwill organization or for the whole Black race. Because how something might affect me may affect somebody else differently.'*

It may be expected that race equity conversations will be more personal and difficult for staff of color, but the interview comments made clear that staff of color may have felt safer engaging in these conversations in a work setting had they been offered additional supports or introductions to the trainings. (Such supports may have also increased the overall value of the trainings.) In addition, such modifications may have made the trainings feel more like mutual work as opposed to just an opportunity for White staff members to learn at the expense of the comfort of staff of color.

## **Few staff made direct linkages between the training they received and the way in which they support participants day to day**

Many youth finish programs like those at the Excel Center® and go on to work in employment settings where they must navigate both implicit and explicit racism. Due to the historical underpinnings of racial injustice, inequality, and segregation in the United States, the effects of these historical processes remain embedded within all our institutions. Staff in Indianapolis told us that this has resulted in some participants of color facing more challenges than White participants when applying for and starting new jobs. Prospective employers may make assumptions about participants or be outwardly biased about how they dress, look, or talk. There are two strategies to navigate this: 1) Prepare young adults for situations where they may encounter racism at work, and 2) prioritize work with employers who are willing to support equity and inclusion approaches. While the GCSI team is aware of the need to add components to their curricula to help young adults understand how to advocate for themselves, the work is slow. In this section and the next, we discuss strategy 1 (training youth). (The last section will discuss strategy 2.)

One reason for staff members to participate in trainings is to change how they work with and serve young adult participants. Some staff in other Generation Work partnerships have noted that understanding more

about the experiences of participants allowed them to have more patience when a participant struggled with something more than expected. When implementing a PYD approach, it is important to foster a sense of belonging and to build positive relationships; getting to know participants better as individuals helps foster this sense of belonging and can build opportunities for those positive relationships. Many young people we spoke to felt truly cared for at the Excel Center® and added that this feeling stems from strong relationships. However, most staff members reported few changes to their interactions with youth. One person, when asked about changes in interactions with young adult participants, said:

*I would say no ... I believe in treating everybody with the same level of respect and dignity ... so I would say I don't think that that changed. But I do think that I gained a deeper understanding of experiences of people ... After I was in that training, I was like, 'Man, this is rooted in centuries of systemic structures that have been put into place.' ... I also feel like I walked away understanding more why anger is there, and [how it] can be so powerful ...*

Another person said:

*I don't think so yet. We've all acknowledged that we need to go back and reflect on ... the things that we just acknowledged and processed, really, and how we integrate ... It created a lot more awareness for me personally ... [but] not a lot tactically about how ... we address it as an organization.*

It was striking that, when asked this question, few respondents could clearly articulate what they would even want to change in terms of integrating an REEL approach into their already strong PYD approach with young adult participants. This finding may be due to the recency of the trainings, but it speaks to the ongoing support needed to translate learnings from trainings into changes to day-to-day practices.

## **Following the trainings, staff members identified employer engagement around racial equity as a clear next step.**

Because navigating difficult conversations with employers can feel challenging and risky for program staff, one alternative is to focus on preparing youth of color for their work in settings that are unlikely to have many other people of color. Some young people may feel ready to handle experiences of racism, but others may not be prepared to respond in a way that feels right to them. While many programs aim to prepare young adults to handle such situations constructively—for example, by working to address the issues, advocating for themselves, understanding their legal options, or resigning—many programs do not do this well. Following a racial equity training, it is imperative to think concretely about next steps for staff to better support young people to be prepared for these experiences.

When a young person feels empowered to choose the right path for themselves, the skills that empower them can also carry them through life—not just through their first post-program employment. However, knowing how to choose the right path is challenging, and GCSI staff felt they needed more preparation to empower their participants. One staff person noted that she doesn't feel that her organization does this well, but added, "I think we can easily embed it into our senior seminar ... but I don't know how or what [to incorporate]."

A staff member of color mentioned that she is a resource for participants who experience racism, but that this is an informal part of her work and not what she feels expected to do in her job description. Another person said that they counsel participants to think through their options: "[Make] some decisions before you react ... inform us, give us a call ... think about ... the options and the choices [you have in the moment]."

Another staff member noted that she wants young adults to stand up for themselves but also knows that sometimes it is better to leave a job—especially if the staff member has already spoken to the young adult's employer about the issue. This also seems to be a shift from the past when the attitude was to emphasize young adults' luck in simply having a job. She said:

*I also have people who are like, 'They're not wanting to promote me. They're not doing this. They're doing this to get rid of me.' And it's like ... 'If that's the case, that's a toxic environment you don't want to be in. It's best for us to find you something else.' ... Because as much as I want them to stand up for themselves, I don't want them to get hurt because I already had that conversation with the employer, and it hasn't gone anywhere.*

Some staff members also focused specifically on the extra scrutiny that applicants of color might receive from employers. One Black staff member also focuses on making sure that applicants of color know how to be prepared for interviews and first days in ways that would minimize and combat assumptions:

*[I] explain to them ... that in order for me to place them into a position, they've got to pull their pants up, cut their hair, shave, and dump the smoke or joint before they enter the facility, before they enter the interview, because perception is everything and first impressions last.*

Some staff felt that Black participants would need to be more conscious of their appearance in order to gain employment in settings that may be racist. Unfortunately, this approach places the burden more on young adults and does little to address the underlying racism that may affect Black new hires differently than White new hires. The staff member quoted above also noted that participants may have been more receptive to hearing this advice from her than from a White staff member because she was trying to teach them how to succeed. However, even staff of color can internalize biases from employers and treat their participants of color differently. There was no indication that the staff member in question was treating participants of color differently, although it is important to discuss this possibility among all staff—not just among White staff.

PYD, while a valuable approach to supporting young adults, is not sufficient to address inequities driven by race and ethnicity.

To ensure that young adults find a job that is a good fit, staff must cultivate relationships with employers willing to create environments that are neither overtly nor covertly racist. One person explicitly noticed a shift: In the past, Goodwill's approach was less focused on supporting participants with employers who weren't necessarily a good fit and more focused on telling a young person to take a job when they were offered one. Due to the trainings and conversations about job fit, this person told us: "[W]e're starting to acknowledge that fit and respect and the ability to advocate for yourself matters ... that's part of the calculus of deciding if it's a job you should take."

Still, even with the increased willingness of Goodwill's employer engagement staff to make more demands of employers (or even stop working with certain employers if problems arise repeatedly), it can be challenging to engage employers in conversations about how to support their staff of color specifically. This is an urgent issue. Young people of color are [a growing proportion](#) of the Indianapolis workforce (and soon will be a [majority of total workers](#) in the United States), so working now to prepare employers to support staff of color will have long-term benefits for businesses and the young adults who work there. Staff members noted that navigating conversations around racism is challenging and takes a lot of time, which people do not always have.

*One of sort of the lingering topics for me is really the employer piece. We have kind of danced around that for the past couple of years now about having really direct, explicit conversations with employers ... about race at the beginning, when something may happen. You know it's happening, but to really get into those deep conversations, it requires a lot, a lot of time and attention, resources, and capacity, which everybody's just really spread thin about that.*

It can be challenging for staff to navigate these conversations partly for fear of what they might hear. It is easier to not broach the subject than to learn that an employer you work with harbors racist opinions or is

unwilling to understand the position or life experiences of the young people they want to hire. One person said:

*You kind of don't know where people are coming from, what they're thinking. So, I think people are really afraid to even approach certain topics because you might find out something that you don't want to hear from somebody. I mean, that's kind of been I don't want to approach certain topics because I might not be able to look at you in the same way again.*

Many staff members said they were aware of how their participants were perceived by employers, but instead of talking about race or racism explicitly, staff focused on teaching employers about individuality.

*[Employers] tend to put people in boxes and make these checklists and ... if you don't check the box, then you're not a good individual. So, it's just making sure that they understand that not everyone can work the same, not everybody's the same, so you have to treat people as individuals, not like a checklist."*

While individuality-oriented discussions helped some staff support young people of color without talking explicitly about race, it may have also set up some young people to struggle in the workforce without realizing that they may have an advocate at Goodwill. This leaves them to navigate conversations or experiences related to racism alone.

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## Discussion

In general, racial equity trainings for program staff aim to help staff learn new and better ways to do their jobs. Conducting race equity trainings [frequently requires going back into history](#) to understand the root causes of inequity and to bring awareness to the ways that current inequities are embedded in both historically racist policies (such as [redlining](#)) and contemporary policies (like [mandatory minimum sentencing laws](#)) that have disparate impacts, particularly on Black people. It also requires an understanding of current conscious and unconscious practices and expectations that create an inequitable environment. In addition, racial equity trainings require participants to identify explicit and ongoing practices, policies, and processes that allow inequitable outcomes to persist. From what we heard from staff in Indianapolis, it is clear that the race equity trainings did bring awareness to a history of which many staff members were not aware. For other staff members who did know the history—often staff members of color—the training provided staff with a chance to connect with colleagues—albeit sometimes in ways that, due to their greater vulnerability, made them feel anxious and unsure.

However, staff did not yet report seeing or enacting changes in how they supported young adults, or in how they engaged with potential employers. Our interviews occurred shortly after many staff finished the training, and change takes time. [Seeing and enacting change is a common challenge with many race equity trainings](#) because learning about racism and biases requires a different skillset than applying what you learn to change your day-to-day interactions or set up new systems to make changes. Trainings are a step in the right direction, but they are only the first step. Time and resources must be committed toward ongoing work to help staff change how they prepare young people for jobs and navigate experiences of racism. Resources must also be committed for conversations with employers about creating a work environment that is as free of racism as possible or that is responsive to accusations of racism in proactive and supportive ways.

As the Generation Work partners in Indianapolis continue to invest in racial equity work, the comments from one interviewee stand out:

*My opinion is 100 percent that [the training] has changed people's perspectives, people's way to communicate ... because I think before, we may have been looking at individuals, and saying, 'Well, that*

*student's not coming. He's Black, White,' whatever the case may be. And so okay, let's forget individuals right now. And let's just look at the systems ...*

It is essential to identify systems both within and outside of Goodwill that are ideal and those that cannot be tolerated. For example, high-quality youth job skills programs prepare students for when they feel that safety precautions are not being taken. Importantly, following a PYD approach provides a supportive culture, but addressing racism requires additional and distinct training, understanding, and action. Preparing young adults to feel empowered when faced with experiences of racism must also be a focus in the curriculum. Each person will respond to situations differently, but staff must consider it essential to prepare young adults to identify how they feel, whether they feel safe, whether there are avenues to improve the situation, or whether they need to leave a given job and environment. Without these skills and people to support them, many young adults will continue to feel alone as they navigate experiences of racism; many may be stuck in positions that are not ideal, leave jobs where change might have been possible, or respond aggressively to situations that justifiably cause anger. None of these are ideal outcomes. Indianapolis' GCSI has made some important and significant steps toward this goal, and the work must continue.

## 2021 Update

As mentioned earlier, this research was conducted in Fall 2019. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the increasing national focus on efforts to reduce anti-Black racism and promote racial equity, we felt it was important to update the status of the work in Indianapolis, which has continued. Based on a recent follow-up conversation with the Indianapolis team in January 2021, the following five areas of work continue to see progress.

First, GCSI has committed to providing opportunities for ongoing training for staff. These opportunities include external training and the development of an internal series called “Conversations on Race,” which focuses on training leadership throughout the organization to have conversations about race and racism.

Second, the leadership of GCSI has committed to incorporating a race equity lens into strategic planning. They have recently joined a cohort of nonprofit organizations led by [Beloved Community](#), a consulting firm helping them identify policies that can improve equity throughout the organization. One person told us, “You can't educate racism away; you have to look at policies and systems.” Leadership seems committed to this statement, and they are currently updating their three-year strategic plan to incorporate REEI objectives for the first time. To inform some of this work, leadership also held a series of “listening conversations,” which offered an opportunity to learn more—first, from staff of color; and now, from everyone in the organization. These conversations allowed staff to discuss their experiences working for GCSI as it relates to race and racism. Themes and findings from these conversations are informing the strategic plan.

Third, several GCSI staff members have started to complete certification as Certified Diversity Professionals. This includes completion of a training focused on human resources and legal aspects of workplace diversity, an internal project, and an exam. While no staff working on this certification have completed the exam yet, they are looking at GCSI's hiring practices through an REEI lens for their internal project; GCSI's vice president of HR and the vice president of mission and education are part of this group.

Fourth, several staff members from GCSI are working with other organizations in Indianapolis—such as EmployIndy, the Department of Workforce Development, Morales Group, Project Azul, Skillful Indiana, and The Mind Trust—to ensure that conversations around REEI continue to take place throughout the city and across partners. They are committed to developing a community of practitioners in Indianapolis that can push conversations about REEI throughout programs and be resources to one another.

Finally, programs within GCSI are beginning to collect and analyze data by race and to develop strategies to support young people. For example, The Excel Centers® are beginning to think about how social justice and

social consciousness can be incorporated into their senior seminar curricula, and are looking at data on enrollment, completion, and length of time in the program by race.

All five of these efforts show how GCSI's work on REEI is an ongoing process. The work wasn't finished when we conducted our initial interviews, and it isn't complete now. The continued, intentional focus on the work has allowed GCSI to make steady progress toward ensuring that GCSI's policies, systems, and curriculum do not result in unequal outcomes for either participants or staff.

## Acknowledgements

We spoke to 10 different people in Indianapolis. While their names and titles are not included here, this case study could not have been written without their insights. We thank them for their willingness to share with us so that we could better capture some of the lessons learned about integrating awareness of racism and racial equity work into their Generation Work local partnership. We also thank the Annie E. Casey Foundation for their support of this work as part of the Generation Work initiative and are grateful for their trust in us as researchers.