

Not just a Flyer: Rethinking Youth Recruitment into Out-of-School Making, Media and Computing Programs

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Recruitment isn't just about getting numbers, but instead is an opportunity to match youth to experiences that are 'good fits' in terms of their interests and identities. This resource explores diverse recruitment strategies around digital learning that focus on 'finding fit'.



What's the Issue?

A large part of youth success in programs depends on ensuring that their visions, interests, and goals are well matched to the various programs offered by an organization. And this successful matching begins as early as recruitment.

Decades of experimentation with recruitment in various organizations has taught us that successful recruitment requires more than just putting flyers out in public spaces. Recruitment flyers depend too much on youth being at the "right place at the right time."

This resource describes how organizations like The Knowledge House, AS220, Beam Center, and the West Michigan Center for Arts and Technology (WMCAT) successfully recruit youth into their programs over time.

Organizations may achieve greater success in recruitment and retention of youth in their programs through different methods that build on:

- Application processes to find the right fit
- Developing community partnerships for recruitment
- Interactive events or showcase performances
- Social media

What Does it Look Like?

The examples below describe how recruitment can take many sophisticated forms that improve the match between youth and programs, while ensuring both youth and organizations are on the path to pursuing their unique goals.

Application Processes to Find the Right Fit

At The Knowledge House, a non-profit education organization focused on youth employment in the tech sector, all youth undergo an application process to enter their programs. However, application processes are not meant to deny youth access to learning opportunities. Instead, applications are developmentally oriented in order to: 1) help the organization understand what knowledge/skill supports youth may need upon entering their programs; 2) match youth to the appropriate programs for their skill levels; and 3) create enough of a barrier to entry for youth so that they can learn how to remain resilient during application processes while demonstrating their degree of interest/commitment to programs.

Regardless of the course level at The Knowledge House, all interested students have to complete a short essay application. This allows youth an opportunity to share the personal interests driving their involvement that are important for educators to know about. For the more advanced courses, the application process becomes more rigorous to not only ensure a level of commitment to the program upon acceptance, but also to test for specific knowledge and skills that students will need to excel in these advanced courses. If youth do well on their short essay applications, they are invited for a phone interview and an in-person logic test. Depending on the course, these tests may ask questions about how youth use technology in their free time (e.g., app use, social media use, etc.), or explore youth's persistence around challenging problems, or even ask youth to create a website or perform specific technology-based tasks to understand their entry-level abilities specific to advanced courses. Then, depending on the interests youth have expressed in their application process (e.g., such as a passion for video games or programming or finances), The Knowledge House staff will pitch different programs to the youth to best match their needs.

At AS220 Youth, an arts and social justice education organization, youth undergo

Guiding Questions

Consider these questions when developing your recruitment strategies:

- Who are the youth you want to see in your organization, and what are their personal interests, goals, concerns, etc.? How can you connect your organizational programs to those unique interests, goals, and concerns?
- How can you use the social networks of the youth already in your program and across your organization to reach new youth who could benefit from what you have to offer?
- What types of showcase events and performance opportunities can your organization support that might organically draw in new youth to your programs?
- In what ways can application processes for your organization's programs support finding the right fit for new youth without discouraging participation?

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an initial application process as well, but simply as a starting point for entering the organization and getting involved with their first program. Similar to The Knowledge House, this application process is helpful for the organization to understand youth's personal interests and goals so that the organization can better connect youth to programs. Youth are interviewed one-on-one following submission of applications, and AS220 staff ask questions that help match youth to the programs that might best meet their needs. Youth are then welcomed into the organization through the age of 21 years, without having to complete another application during their time in AS220.

Partnerships for Recruitment

AS220 Youth also recruits youth through partnerships with local schools and organizations, including schools for young parents, juvenile detention centers, youth arts collectives, afterschool programs, and more. Through AS220's programs during the school day and afterschool, youth get a taste of what is available at AS220 in hands-on workshops or field trips to AS220 studios. These bite-sized experiences create organic ways where youth can be inspired to get more deeply involved with AS220 programs. AS220 also partners with Family Services social workers and caseworkers around the city who are supporting youth in the foster care system, juvenile justice system, or who are teen parents. These social workers bring youth to AS220 to get tours of the space, which quickly opens the door for youth to sign up for programs and get involved in the AS220 family. AS220 also hangs youth art at the local juvenile courtroom so youth moving through that space can learn about the programs AS220 has to offer to them. In these ways, AS220's partnership recruitment approaches seek to intentionally find ways to share their programs with youth who have too often been given the least opportunities to learn and thrive.

In another example of how partnerships can support recruitment, WMCAT has a close relationship with Grand Rapids Public School System to ensure recruitment across all the high schools in the city. As a result of this partnership, the schools provide WMCAT with access to: 1) in-school recruitment opportunities (e.g., lunchtime recruitment, classroom presentations, etc.); 2) event recruitment opportunities (that allow WMCAT to meet families, parents, legal guardians, siblings, etc.); 3) paper recruitment opportunities (e.g., announcements or program efforts featured in quarterly newsletters, etc.); and 4) electronic recruitment opportunities (e.g., sharing about WMCAT in weekly E-newsletters and bulletins that go out to all public school families). After students learn about WMCAT program opportunities, they are encouraged to complete a paper-based application form that must be submitted in-person. This is because WMCAT learned that encouraging students to sign-up for programs online often resulted in more students applying than actually showing up, because it was easy to complete a form online without committing to actually going to WMCAT. However, when youth bring their applications to WMCAT in-person, they are provided an opportunity to tour the space, learn about programs that best match their interests, and gain that little bit of self-confidence and curiosity needed to follow-through with the application process. During this initial visit, youth also gain insight into the various programs offered with tours of the various art studios and learning spaces. The school district continues to be an important partner for this aspect of WMCAT recruitment, because they also provide transportation to/from WMCAT's programs for youth at the high schools so that they can submit their initial applications and attend WMCAT programs. Thus WMCAT's partnership with the public school system is crucial to their recruitment and retention process.

Public Events for Recruitment

At AS220 Youth, capstone performances of their various programs are also an important part of their recruitment process. The Zu Krew—a youth performing arts and music group that formed at AS220—does a large number of performances in the community, in addition to sharing about their work through radio interviews. The AS220 theater troupe’s performances also draw in a range of people to the organization. And the digital arts and apparel program youth run regular events, such as pop-up shops where they showcase and sell their work, attracting a large number of new youth into AS220. In previous years, AS220’s monthly open-mics were also a space that resulted in effective recruitment into their programs. The organic ways that youth learn about AS220 through word-of-mouth among peers is now a more intentional recruitment process for the organization through these showcase events. When youth unrelated to AS220 get a chance to see other youth shine and see the final product of working through performing arts, music, poetry, digital arts, and other programs, they get the clearest sense of what it can mean to be involved at AS220. And AS220 staff ensure that information and applications are easily available to youth attending their events and performances, building on the excitement and interest of young audience members.

Beam Center, a ‘maker’ focused organization based in New York City, recruits some of their teen youth at local schools through interactive workshops, where youth create projects in less than an hour that give them a taste of the types of activities they can engage in through Beam’s programs. In these workshops, Beam Center educators give a quick description of their programs with photos illustrating what they have to offer, and then youth create projects

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like the 'Circuit Mask' that involves using cardboard for the head, two LEDs for the eyes, and wires connecting the LEDs to a 3V battery on the back of the mask. Youth get the opportunity to learn how to safely solder their circuits—which works well for exciting youth interest since soldering involves building trust with your partners while using a 750° F soldering iron together. These types of hands-on recruitment activities are critical for gaining youth interest since presentations alone do not fully illustrate the joy and exhilaration youth may feel when physically creating something. Additionally, ensuring that there is an educator partner or advocate in the school where Beam Center conducts these recruitment workshops—partners/advocates who can recruit potentially interested students to join the workshop and follow-up with youth after the workshop—helps cement the engagement formed through the experience and the follow-through for youth to apply and visit Beam Center.

Social Media for Recruitment

Not surprisingly, social media platforms—Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, etc.—serve as a valuable means for recruiting youth. The Knowledge House recruits using their student and teacher networks to ensure that new people have opportunities to get involved in their programs. Employing a full-time Special Projects and Events Coordinator who can manage all marketing and outreach efforts as well as event coordination, The Knowledge House is able to more effectively place ads as announcements on their various social media pages. This strategy has served useful to both recruiting new students and encouraging current students to apply for new programs coming up in the organization.

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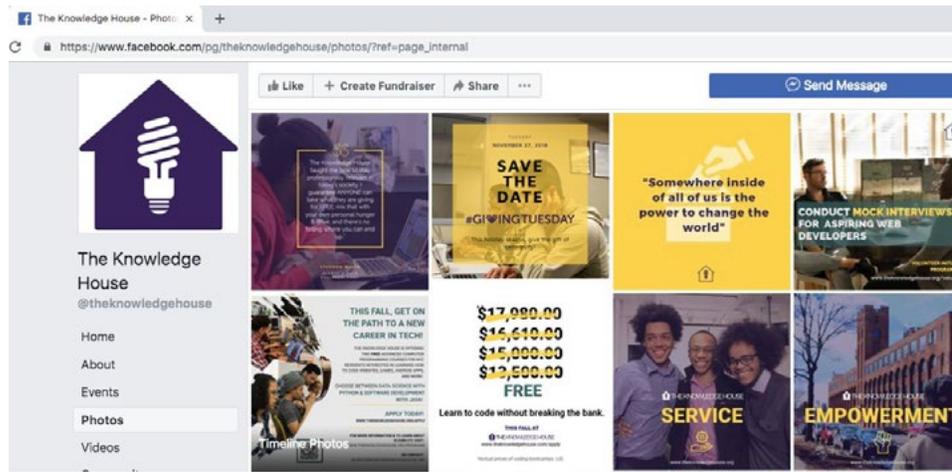


Beam Center Circuit Masks

What Does it Lead to?

Experimenting with recruitment in the targeted ways described above can have important long-lasting impact on organizations, including:

- **Attracting new youth into programs** who have had little to no previous access to out-of-school learning opportunities, but can truly benefit from what organizations have to offer.
- **Building capacity of partnerships** that out-of-school time organizations have with other institutions and schools to be even better at serving youth.
- **Ensuring effective matching** so that youth not only sign-up for programs, but that they are good fits with the programs that will best meet their interests and learning needs so that they can be the best they can be.
- **Improved retention rates** through more informed youth-to-program matching during recruitment.



Examples of The Knowledge House's Facebook Recruitment Efforts

Tensions and Challenges

The following tensions and challenges should be considered when developing specific recruitment strategies:

- Communities have unique histories and cultural practices that shape the ways people interact, find new information, build social networks, etc. As a result, youth in different communities have varying interests and concerns that reflect their unique cultural-historical pathways and contexts. Organization leaders must seek out an understanding of what those unique histories, cultural practices, interests, and concerns are for youth in order to build the best recruitment strategy that will catch their attention.
- Organizations serve different kinds of purposes driven by different visions and missions. Some of the recruitment methods described above may not match what you have to offer or how your organizations are structured (e.g., drop-in center vs. long-term programs, etc.). Finding the best recruitment strategy related to organizational goals and mission is important for ultimate success.
- Not everyone has the capacity or time to hire marketing employees, lead recruitment workshops, etc., so considering what is the most high-impact given the resources at hand is critical.

The Role of Media and Technology

Media and technology can be central to recruitment strategies in a digital world. Many youth participate in social media, and recruitment announcements through these platforms can be effective for attracting interest or attention. At the same time, media or technological tools can be valuable ways to excite youth in the context of interactive events, performances, or workshops used for recruiting. Ultimately, the most powerful way to recruit youth can be when youth see their peers excelling at expressing themselves through the use of media and technology in our unique program contexts.

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