

## *A Year Up: How a Pioneering Program Teaches Young Adults Real Skills for Real Jobs with Real Success*

By Gerald Chertavian

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*A Year Up: How a Pioneering Program Teaches Young Adults Real Skills for Real Jobs with Real Success* describes the evolutionary development of Year Up, a non-profit organization founded by the social entrepreneur, Gerald Chertavian to promote social and economic justice among America's disenfranchised youth. He describes how there are 5.2 million unemployed young adults between the ages of 18-24 who face little to no opportunity for academic or career development beyond those asking, "You want fries with that?" in a labor market facing a severe shortage of skilled workers.

To make matters worse, society has come to perceive these disenfranchised youths as an economic and social liability, when, in fact, they could just as easily represent the solution to America's ailing economy. After all, they are highly-motivated, hard-working, dedicated people who simply want a decent living wage and their own place in American society. With locations in Boston, Providence, Atlanta, Washington D.C., New York, and San Francisco, Year Up has created a year-long paid internship program, capable of serving 240 candidates each year. These programs provide students with the professional knowledge and experience businesses demand, enabling them to pursue a more productive future.

Candidates begin with a highly rigorous application and selection process, which consists of three face-to-face interviews, the development of a personal essay, and their repeated attempts to prove their commitment to the ideals of the program. Those lucky few who are ultimately selected will receive a year-long, paid internship, which includes a stipend of up to \$25,000 and 23 college credit hours. The development of a point demerit system maintains these standards throughout the program. Every student begins with 200 points, and a week without infractions will earn them an additional 15 points, but each infraction will reduce their points and their financial compensation for that week/period. Any individual who drops below 100 points must draft a letter to their colleagues explaining their recommitment to the programs, and once they reach 0, they are self-removed from the program.

The program is divided into two phases. The initial five-month period is spent in milestone discussions and professional training seminars at the Year Up facility. These discussions act as a kind of outreach program where the candidates describe the hardships they have endured, resulting in emotional trauma. Sharing these stories creates a bond between the group members, allows them to move on, and demonstrates the unconquered spirits of the individuals involved, having fought and overcome so many obstacles so early in life. The rest of their time is spent in professional training seminars addressing business basics (i.e., proper attire, speech, and etiquette) and the development of marketable skills in information technology, financial operations, and quality assurance. The last six months transition to their corporate internship position. Chertavian makes it clear that this is not a handout. A great deal of effort and time goes into matching corporate needs with student abilities. Instructors develop a score card to assess a student's technological ability, people skills, and any

additional information they feel is relevant. These corporate representatives continue assessing students' abilities, drafting reports, and firing those who fail to meet the standards.

The story relies on a number of personal narratives, which presents a very human face to the problems these individuals face on a daily basis and the efforts of those involved with the evolution of Year Up. To his credit, Chertavian doesn't pull his punches, acknowledging his many mistakes and accomplishments in his life. Yet, having come from a White upper-middle-class background, there are times when he fails to realize the cultural aspects/influences in his presentation of life in American society. Still he accepts that it is perhaps easier for people to acknowledge the reports of crime and unemployment rates than it is to listen to the stories of disaffected youths in these programs. One surprising narrative was the description of interns who must change out of the required "business attire" before returning home at night, so as to avoid being bullied, beaten, shot, or even killed. He also recognizes that some may consider the financial expense of this program and balk. Interns accepted into this program receive a considerable stipend of \$25,000, which is shared equally among corporate sponsors and the Year Up foundation. When placed within a larger economic framework, there are clear and obvious benefits to the support these programs provide. In 2010, the individual poverty line was \$10,830, the disenfranchised youths targeted by this program are able to earn much more by following alternative career paths (i.e., drug dealing). If they are caught, they will be placed in a state prison and cost the taxpayers \$36,835 a year. Additionally, when addressing affluent donors, Chertavian refers to the \$260,000 they will gladly pay towards their child's tuition at a private college and inquire why is it wrong to support an individual without any opportunities with one-tenth of that amount? Ultimately, the reader is left with the realization that everyone has problems, and it is the perseverance of individuals that ultimately makes a difference in the world.

Incoming college students will appreciate the personal narratives of those involved in the development of the Year Up program. The stories present aspects of American life and society that are either ignored or disassociated during the evening news; as a result, they invoke a deep emotional response in the mind of the reader. A few of the issues presented in this text include child emancipation, homelessness, long term abuse, robbery, being shot, jail terms, and, one tragic story of an intern being shot and killed. Chertavian describes all of these events with a great deal of empathy, beginning with his experiences in the Big Brother program, which in effect, opened his eyes to the larger world. There are a number of obvious disconnects between his life and the lives of those Year Up assists, but his heart is in the right place.

The text itself presents a rather simple narrative, and creates a rather enjoyable and easy to read story of his successes, failures, and misconceptions in developing the Year Up Foundation. It is similar in function and design to the biographies written by other business leaders (i.e., Jack Welch, Michael Dell, or Andrew Grove) as he re-examines the role of his organization during periods of growth and development when business leaders typically take on more responsibilities, personnel and establish new objectives in response to the age-old question of "where do we go from here?"

Applying the text to a first-year orientation program, there are some who would argue that incoming college students may fail to make the connections between their own lives and the lives of America's disenfranchised, disaffected, and unemployed youth. I would argue that college freshmen weighed the benefits of pursuing a professional career, but chose to pursue an advanced education. The interns in the Year Up program appear to have no other alternative for a better life besides developing professional skills. Either way, this text provides a solid introduction to the age old debate between proponents of professional/vocational programs (i.e., Booker T. Washington & Benjamin Franklin) and those supporting a liberal arts education (i.e., W.E.B. DuBois, & Thomas Jefferson), especially when we consider that vocational education programs have evolved into new areas to include business administration and engineering programs as technology developed over time (Bok, 2006).

Faculty members could use the text as a discussion starter, by playing Devil's advocate and arguing in support of a liberal education. Further, they could suggest that vocational programs assess a child's future potential and then herd them into specific programs far too early in life, so that it restricts their future mobility. In effect, the division of labor, in this manner, would create a distinct class of individuals, limiting their social mobility especially when we consider that upper-level students are more often directed toward liberal academic programs, while lower-level children are directed towards vocational training (Urban & Wagner, 2004). As Kozol (2005) states, if one is unaware of the actual professional and academic choices available, the choice of a career means virtually nothing.

Alternatively the stories may inspire some first year students to participate in summer internship programs, volunteer as a Big Brother, or even pursue a career as a social entrepreneur by applying the ideals of business to solving America's social problems. Finally, the linear format presents a fair representation of the processes involved in establishing a new business or foundation.

## References

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