



ACCE Education Attainment DIVISION

Engaging, connecting, and supporting chambers in their efforts to impact local education and workforce development

Developing the Character of Our Future Workforce

Readiness for work and life is no longer as simple as earning a degree or mastering the technical skills needed to do a certain job well. Today's rapidly changing and complex world demands a workforce that is flexible, resilient, and equipped with a range of social and emotional skills that make the difference between getting the job and keeping the job. Employers cite a lack of soft skills like initiative, responsibility, time-management, and self-management as a top concern in talent development for employees at all levels. Now, more than ever, communities must work to equip young people with the skills and characteristics they need to be successful in the workplace. Research shows that out of school time is a critical period for nurturing these competencies in young people. Thus, it is crucial that chambers of commerce and other community stakeholders collaborate to implement programs, policies, and systems change that invest in the character development of future employees. Doing so will not only equip employers with a ready, able, and sustainable workforce, but will also equip our communities with engaged and productive citizens.

Leveraging Partnerships for Youth Development—Bloomington, Ind.

Centered on effective partnerships with their members and the public education system, Greater Bloomington Chamber of Commerce's [Franklin Initiative](#) provides students with career exploration as well as guidance around the personal and professional attributes that will make them more employable, and thus more likely to meet success. The initiative offers simulations introducing students to personal finance and self-management, as well as providing interactions with community leaders who can guide students on professional soft skill development, the impact of social media, and effective interviewing skills. The Franklin Initiative provides students with a myriad of opportunities for development while simultaneously promoting and sustaining the connection between the business community and education necessary for fostering a prepared workforce.

- **Student Benefits:** Students are given the opportunity to practice crucial soft skills like self-management, etiquette, and self-control while interacting with community leaders who can serve as role models and guide them toward further professional and personal development.
- **Employer Benefits:** The Franklin Initiative supports workforce development needs of the business community by helping to address skills gaps and supporting talent retention in their area. The initiative also allows employers the opportunity to interact directly with students and the education system, thus helping to ensure that students are familiar with and prepared for the opportunities that exist in their own community.
- **Chamber Role:** The Greater Bloomington Chamber leads this initiative, relying on partnerships with both business and education to support these important development opportunities for middle and high school students.
- **Program Results:** More than 1,600 students and hundreds of volunteers participate in the Franklin Initiative's programs each year. As a result, more students will graduate from high school ready for life and work with connections to local business and opportunity already in place.

What Can Your Chamber Do?

- Advocate for the benefits of youth character development among local businesses.
- Discover whether soft skill/character development programs are already offered in your community, and whether there is a role your chamber can/should play.
- Find ways to incorporate character/soft skill development into pre-existing chamber programs.
- Form or utilize existing partnerships with K-12 education and after-school providers to support character development for young people around the clock.
- Partner with youth-serving organizations to identify ways your chamber and the business community can support youth character development.
- Connect with chambers of commerce who have advanced successful youth character development initiatives to discuss best practices.

Personal and Professional Development for Tomorrow's Leaders—Las Cruces, N.M.

Responding to the challenges consistently faced by employers in recruiting a well-trained, soft-skill enabled workforce, the Greater Las Cruces Chamber of Commerce developed its [Junior Leadership program](#). The program accepts 30 high school juniors every year and leads them through a nine-month leadership development program aimed at transforming them into personal, professional, and community leaders. Through the program, participants learn about their community, visit career sites, interact with community leaders, engage in reflective personal development, and complete volunteer projects.

- **Student Benefits:** Through this program, students are equipped with higher levels of confidence both in themselves and in their ability to make a difference in their community. Students also come away with a stronger understanding of the skills they already possess for effective leadership, and a toolkit that will allow them to develop those skills throughout their lives.
- **Employer Benefits:** The Las Cruces Junior Leadership program familiarizes students with the uniqueness of their community and the opportunities that exist there with the goal of increasing the area's talent retention. By equipping students with intensive soft skill development, the program increases the likelihood of successful hiring for employers in the future.
- **Chamber Role:** Las Cruces Chamber leads this effort utilizing partnerships with K-12 education, business, and the public sector to craft a rigorous and transformative program for young people.
- **Program Results:** All of the program's participants, upon completion, go on to receive some form of post-secondary education. The chamber estimates that approximately 50 percent go on to pursue degrees from four-year institutions, while approximately 50 percent pursue a certificate or some other credential.

Whole Child Development in After-School Settings—Flint, Mich.

Flint & Genesee Chamber of Commerce's [YouthQuest](#) initiative is an after-school program serving over 2,000 K-12 students annually across several school sites. The program offers developmentally appropriate programs including academic support, experiential learning, enrichment activities, and healthy behavior workshops for elementary students as well as college and career readiness curriculum, exposure to emerging careers, and service learning opportunities for middle and high schoolers. Flint & Genesee Chamber also offers a [TeenQuest](#) program, which is a five-week pre-employment and leadership program. During the program, participants have 12 objectives they must meet in areas such as etiquette, teamwork, reframing conflict, and collaboration. Upon graduation of the program, the chamber assists participants in finding work with local companies through their Summer Youth Initiative job fair.

- **Student Benefits:** Through both YouthQuest and TeenQuest, students are offered a safe and nurturing space for out of school time character development. Through these intentional, whole-child development programs, students are equipped with skills and competencies necessary to navigating the hurdles of life and succeeding both professionally and personally.
- **Employer Benefits:** These programs help to ensure that Flint and Genesee's young people are provided with experiences and learning opportunities that will prepare them to be successful employees in the future. Further, through job placement services like those provided by the Summer Youth Initiative job fair, the chamber directly aids businesses and nonprofits in meeting their pressing talent needs.
- **Chamber Role:** YouthQuest and TeenQuest are led and operated by the Flint & Genesee Chamber. The chamber employs full-time, grant-funded staff responsible for overseeing the programs. All youth programs – YouthQuest, TeenQuest and Summer Youth Initiative – are made possible by the generous support of the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation.

The Case for Investing in Character Development

- Research shows that every \$1 invested in youth character development yields \$11 in return (RWJF, 2017).
- Workplace demands are changing—workers will increasingly need to know how to solve complex problems, manage competing priorities, and engage in changing tasks throughout their careers.
- 77 percent of employers believe that soft skills like dependability, possessing a strong work ethic, and being team-oriented are just as important as hard skills.
- Early soft skills development not only equips young people with competencies to succeed in the workplace, but also reduces the chance they will experience poverty, legal troubles, and mental health issues.