

AUGUST 2025

Reimagining the Summer after High School through Career-Connected Learning

By NESHAT YAZDANI *and* LORI CHAJET
with MANIJEH HART *and* SARAH ZELLER-BERKMAN

THE SUMMER BETWEEN high school graduation and the start of college is a significant but often overlooked moment, especially for students from low-income households and those who are the first in their families to attend college. Removed from the structured and supportive environment of high school, overwhelmed with questions about their futures, and armed only with a hazy vision of what college entails, many recent graduates can face barriers that disrupt their college plans before college even begins. Nationally, as many as 40% of college-intending students do not enroll, a phenomenon known as summer melt,¹ and 24% of college-goers from low-income high schools do not return for their second year of college.² It is critical to have programs that offer young people a set of experiences to help them step more confidently into their first year of college. In this piece, we present one such experience – the *Summer College and Career Intensive* (“*Summer CCI*”). Launched in NYC in 2022, Summer CCI is a career-connected learning program for incoming college students that combines paid summer work and for-credit college coursework. Its goal is to leverage the critical summer months to introduce participants to college life, build academic and professional skills, and, perhaps most importantly, instill confidence that they can succeed in college and beyond.

Research shows that students from low-income families are less likely than their peers from middle- and high-income families to visit colleges, earn college credit

while in high school, and participate in high-quality internships;³ at the same time, students are more likely to persist to graduation when they enter college with an orientation to its landscape, pre-college credits, and opportunities for career exploration.⁴ Employers are calling for young people to have more career development and stronger workplace skills,⁵ and the students themselves seem to be listening: 43% of high school students wish they had more support identifying good-fitting career pathways⁶ and 64% want more opportunities for career-connected learning before they go to college.⁷ For the predominantly low-income and first-generation college students Summer CCI serves, it is the dual nature of the program – the preparation for college *and* careers – that makes the summer experience so valuable.

Summer CCI is a NYC-based partnership among the Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP), a group of youth-serving community-based organizations (CBOs), the CUNY School of Professional Studies (SPS), College Access: Research & Action (CARA), and Expanded Schools. Summer CCI strategically engages existing NYC college and career-focused programs to create a unique experience. During six weeks spanning July and August, it provides high school graduates with 1) pre-college credits, 2) career-connected learning, 3) a deep orientation to the college environment, and 4) the opportunity to earn money. It leverages the fact that high school graduates with college plans in place are ready to ask questions, absorb information, and develop

“Reflecting on my experience taking [Intro to Positive Youth Development] and completing my SYEP placement, it helped me to understand that college is about a lot more than academic learning. I have seen myself grow personally and professionally. It also showed me the real-world effects that having a growth mindset has. My SYEP placement also helped me to practice the soft skills I need to work on, such as time management, communication, and independent problem solving.” — Summer CCI Participant, age 18

a tangible vision of college in ways they couldn't have imagined while still in high school. While it draws on elements found in other programs for recent high school graduates, Summer CCI thoughtfully integrates them into **one coordinated experience**.

The results so far have been impressive. Summer CCI participants are over **twenty percentage points more likely to enroll in college**⁸ and **seven percentage points more likely to persist to their second year**, compared to national averages.⁹

This paper describes Summer CCI as it has been piloted with CBOs working in the youth-development field. It then documents the program's impact across three pilot cohorts and presents recommendations to offer this opportunity to more students and to expand it to other fields of work and study.

Summer CCI: How It Works

SUMMER CCI INTEGRATES career-connected learning, paid work, college credit, and near-peer coaching by leveraging a set of existing programs.

Eligible students apply through SYEP for summer jobs working with young people. Once accepted, they are placed in one of several summer camps as counselors, teaching assistants, and/or mentors to school-aged students. Participants receive three college credits for completing a CPR and First Aid course. In addition, they earn two college credits for completing a course that they take alongside their work placement. This in-person, six-week-long class – *Introduction to Positive Youth Development and College & Career Exploration* – is taught by faculty from CUNY's SPS Youth Studies program and exposes students to the theory and practice of youth development. With a focus on preparing students for college-level writing, participants complete weekly assignments that prompt them to reflect on how the course

Eligibility & Benefits

Participants are recruited from non-profit organizations across NYC and must meet the following criteria:

- ▶ Graduation from an NYC public high school
- ▶ Demonstrated interest in working with youth
- ▶ Interest in completing specialized, credit-bearing training
- ▶ Plans to attend college in the fall, with priority given to students planning to enroll at a CUNY institution
- ▶ Availability from July through August
- ▶ Eligible for the Department of Youth and Community Development's SYEP program

In the six-week program, students receive:

- ▶ Approximately \$2,400 from the Department of Youth and Community Development's SYEP program
- ▶ 5 transferable CUNY credits¹⁰
- ▶ Professional skills through a supervised work experience
- ▶ A grounded understanding of the connections between academic coursework and career pathways through a relevant college course
- ▶ College navigational skills through college transition workshops

readings and concepts relate to their work placements. The course also includes workshops on the navigational skills needed to transition into college. Each class is led jointly by a CUNY SPS professor and a near-peer leader – a CUNY student hired by the partner CBO and trained

Core Program Components: One Coordinated Experience

PAID WORK EXPERIENCE

Program participants work 25 hours per week at youth-serving CBOs and are paid through SYEP at or above New York State's hourly minimum wage.

CBO partners & youth-serving work sites:

- Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation
- Good Shepherd Services - Bronx LifeLink
- Good Shepherd Services - Brooklyn LifeLink
- New Settlement

RELATED COURSEWORK & CREDITS

Program participants get experience in a college-level course through CUNY SPS and the opportunity to earn up to 5 credits through Lehman College Credit for Prior Learning.

- CPR + First-Aid course (3 credits)
- CUNY SPS course: *Introduction to Positive Youth Development and College and Career Exploration* (2 credits). Course topics include:
 - Identity, Assets, and Self-Awareness
 - Fostering Relationship Skills and Enabling Environments
 - Mindset, Agency, and Self-Management

COLLEGE ORIENTATION WORKSHOPS

Program participants gain an understanding of how to navigate CUNY through college orientation workshops designed by CARA and led by CARA-trained peer leaders

- **Workshop topics include:**
 - Understanding Course Syllabi and Campus Vocab
 - Self-Advocacy Skills
 - Communicating with College Professors
 - Making Informed Decisions about Adding and Dropping Courses
 - Sense of Belonging

by CARA. The integrated approach is designed to foster both personal growth and practical experience within a supportive learning community.

The Impact of Summer CCI

SINCE LAUNCHING IN 2022, Summer CCI has provided nearly 250 participants with pre-college transition support and career-connected learning opportunities through four CBOs and their youth-serving worksites. Through surveys, focus groups, and analyzing participants' enrollment records, we observed the program's multidimensional impact:

- 1. Summer CCI reduces summer melt and supports college persistence:** Across the three cohorts, **81% of the participants enrolled at CUNY in the fall** – a summer melt rate of 19%, or less than half of the national estimate of 40%.¹¹ Participants who enrolled in college after Summer CCI also had a high likelihood of persisting: **93% of students from the most recent cohort returned for their second semester, and 83% of students from the first two cohorts returned for their second year of college, a figure that outpaces national averages by nearly seven percentage points**¹² and surpasses CUNY-wide first-year persistence rates for both bachelor's and associate programs.¹³ Given the demonstrable link between pre-college credits and persistence to college graduation,¹⁴ Summer CCI has the potential to increase on-time graduation rates as well.
- 2. Summer CCI prepares students for the transition to college:** Participants recalled how the program

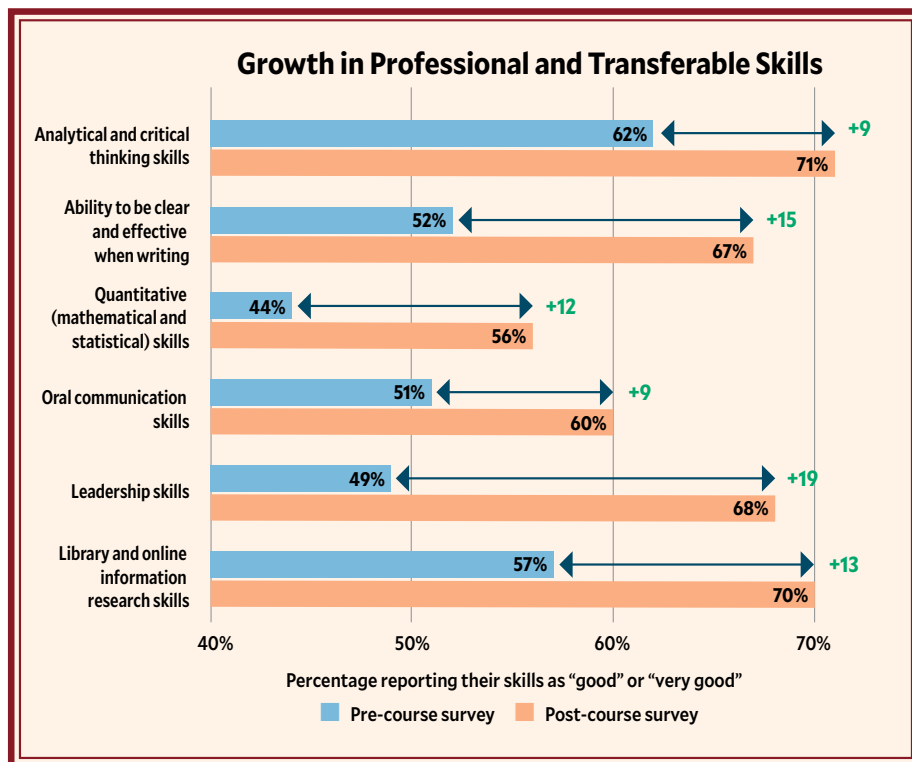
helped them build a clearer vision of what it meant to be a college student. As one alumnus of the program, now in his third year of college, shared: "Understanding the expectations of a student and having a course guideline gave me an idea of how a classroom would be [run]." Others highlighted the navigational skills they gained, with members of the most recent cohort reporting that they found the lessons on communicating with professors, course registration, financial aid, navigating a syllabus, and campus vocabulary especially helpful. Many also credited the program for helping them become familiar with campus resources and support systems. As one put it: "This course helped me learn more about the CUNY system...For example, how financial aid and the credits you gained can affect your standing in college. I feel like everyone should go through a course like this before they officially enter college so that all these rules and information don't seem hidden to them."

- 3. Summer CCI teaches professional skills:** Over the six-week program, participants reported significant growth in a range of professional and transferable skills.¹⁵ The most significant gains were in leadership skills (+19 percentage points), writing skills (+15 percentage points), and research skills (+13 percentage points).

Participant reflections underscore how the experience fostered personal skills, including being compassionate with others, self-advocacy in professional spaces, and navigating a collegiate classroom. One participant said, "The experience helped me to practice the soft skills I need to work on, such as time

management, communication, and independent problem solving." Another noted, "My SYEP placement allowed me to see how concepts from classes and leadership skills are utilized in everyday work scenarios." Course instructors similarly described participants' growing professional skills. As one instructor put it, "I saw a difference towards the end of the summer in terms of how they were writing emails, in terms of how they were communicating, not only with me but with [other participants]."

- 4. Summer CCI furthers insight into careers:** In focus groups, participants described how Summer CCI furthered their career development. One said, "The program helped me consider jobs that I would



have never tried in the past ... I was nervous at first, but simply trying it made me realize I was better equipped to handle it than I thought. In the end, I actually enjoyed it, which taught me that it's important to branch out professionally because you never know what will be right for you without trying." Another explained how the experience helped them reflect on their career pathway, saying, "This experience helped me assess whether this industry aligns with my personal and professional goals." As one course instructor noted, "I definitely saw students making a connection [between the prior week's course content and their work experiences that week]...whenever they were reflecting, it was like 'you know, last week I was like this, but now, I've seen myself changing in these ways.'" The reflections highlight how this type of career-connected learning experience, particularly for students just starting college, can help make tangible what students need to do in college to prepare for the career they want after graduation.

Next Steps to Grow Summer CCI

WITH SYEP SERVING 100,000 young people in private, non-profit, and government placements and 25 CUNY campuses offering 2,800 majors and degree programs, NYC is a fertile ground for expanding Summer CCI to reach more students.

The time is right to:

- **Expand dual enrollment programs for graduating high school seniors:** Building on the momentum from New York's newly announced College-in-High-School Opportunity Fund,¹⁶ NYC should extend dual enrollment programs to support graduating seniors in the summer between high school and college. The initiative should integrate a deep orientation to the college landscape at the moment when it is most salient – after high school graduation, when students' mindsets are shifting from being high schoolers to becoming college students.
- **Extend the Summer CCI program to all youth-serving SYEP placements:** All recent high school graduates placed in youth-serving CBOs should have the opportunity to take CUNY SPS's *Introduction to Positive Youth Development and College & Career Exploration* course. This change alone would substantially extend the program's reach.
- **Broaden Summer CCI to include SYEP placements in other fields:** Leveraging faculty from across CUNY, Summer CCI can diversify its industry focus, allowing the program to support students interested in an array of majors and careers. Work placements can include government jobs, healthcare, business, and technology, and those placements can be coupled with related courses in public policy, biology, marketing, or computer science, among others.

What is required to enable Summer CCI to reach its full potential? The first step is to increase collaboration across NYC Public Schools, CUNY, and the Department of Youth & Community Development, and to deepen engagement with targeted non-profit and for-profit partners. Beyond that, we must forge a consensus on the importance of providing students with opportunities to connect classroom learning with relevant majors and careers. As the pathway from a college degree to a rewarding career grows more complex, we can no longer afford to delay making the connection between the classroom and the workplace. Summer CCI has shown the way. When students begin college with a template for connecting college and career, they are better positioned to enter college with confidence, and to graduate with a career plan and skills they need to succeed in the workforce. New York City has the pieces of this work already in place; by putting them together in the transitional summer between high school and college, we have a rare opportunity to bring a reimagined vision of career-connected learning to thousands of NYC high school graduates every year.

Acknowledgments

THE SUMMER COLLEGE and Career Intensive (Summer CCI) is a collaborative initiative spearheaded by The Pinkerton Foundation and developed as a partnership among ExpandEd Schools, the CUNY School of Professional Studies, College Access: Research & Action, and several community-based organizations. The pioneer CBOs include Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation, Good Shepherd Services, and New Settlement, and the following joined later: The Children's Aid Society, Commonpoint Queens, Henry Street Settlement, PENCIL, and Queens Community House. We are grateful to these partners for their collaboration on this initiative. We also wish to acknowledge the Aronson Family Foundation for its financial support of Summer CCI, the Department of Youth and Community Development's Summer Youth Employment Program for funding student summer jobs, and Richard Finger at Lehman College for coordinating the CUNY credit process.

About the Authors

NESHAT YAZDANI is Associate Director of Evaluation at CARA. She can be reached at neshat.yazdani@caranyc.org.

LORI CHAJET is Co-Founder and Co-Executive Director of CARA. She can be reached at lori.chajet@caranyc.org.

MANIJEH HART is an Adjunct Lecturer at CUNY School for Professional Studies. She can be reached at mhart@gradcenter.cuny.edu.

SARAH ZELLER-BERKMAN is the Academic Director of Youth Studies Programs at CUNY School for Professional Studies. She can be reached at Sarah.Zeller-Berkman@cuny.edu.

How Initiatives Get Woven Together ... By a Village: A Grantmaker's Perspective

An addendum by LAURIE R. DIEN

As a grantmaker, I'm privileged to have a 30,000-foot view of the field. From my vantage point, I observe program models, even components of models, that work and make sense. Equally important, I get to know the talent behind those models. Fortunately, these folks trust me. They tell me what really works with youth, and what doesn't. I then gather this knowledge and make suggestions, all while receiving their informed feedback. If everything looks good, these talented folks then implement what they have helped weave together and make it happen.

The idea for the Summer College and Career Intensive started with a phone call to the CUNY University Dean of Education, Ashleigh Thompson. It was in the midst of the pandemic. I suggested to her that afterschool programs could hire CUNY education majors to fill the workforce gap. Dean Thompson, who was working on getting teachers in classrooms, suggested focusing on "summer melt." That led to my reminiscences of discussions about career pathways for teaching with Emily Van Ingen, the Deputy Director of Cypress Hills LDC. These thoughts, in turn, led to an idea: What if students who just graduated high school, who are interested in education, took a class while working at summer camps as Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) participants? The students would get a taste of the college experience, earn valuable college credit, and connect their coursework with their real-world work experience. Excitement was building. It was time to gather a trusted group of youth development professionals to refine these ideas. Emily Van Ingen, Allison Palmer (formerly of New Settlement), and Theory Thompson (Chief Program Officer of Education Programs at Good Shepherd Services) offered important advice on what works and what doesn't. They quickly noted, for instance, that one college credit means nothing – it has to be more – and the more, the better.

But what kind of course would it be?

I turned to Dr. Sarah Zeller-Berkman, the Director of Youth Studies at the School for Professional Studies (SPS) at CUNY. Did she have a class that would fit into six weeks for students about to enter college – and could SPS grant credits? Dr. Zeller-Berkman worked with one of her professors, Dr. Manijeh Hart, to develop a class. They then enlisted other youth studies professors who would teach in-person at the community-based organization sites. The beauty of this was that the material would be totally applicable to what the young people were doing at the camps, and would also be taught by folks who truly understood adolescents.

What about the credits? Dr. Jennifer Sparrow, Senior Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, was a key contact person. She said that SPS couldn't provide credits because the students aren't yet matriculated, but suggested checking with Dr. Richard Finger, the Vice President of Enrollment Management at Lehman College, who is a huge proponent of Credit for Prior Learning. Dr. Sparrow added that SPS and some other CUNY colleges give three credits for American Red Cross certifications in CPR/First Aid. Dr. Finger, a true problem-solver, cracked the code. During the summer after high school, graduating students are in limbo between two systems. However, he suggested using Credit for Prior Learning to give the teens two credits for their coursework and related SYEP work, and three credits for CPR/First Aid. All five credits would transfer to other CUNY schools.

There was still more work to be done. Since the participants had to be graduating high school seniors who were most likely enrolling into CUNY, we needed SYEP slots outside of the SYEP lottery system. Candace Brazier-Thurman, the COO, and Monia Salam, the Vice President for Career-Connected Learning of Expanded Schools, were able to put together slots that were part of SYEP's Career Ready program. ExpandedED would work with community-based organizations to sign up young people for SYEP, and would also take over

the management of the initiative.

The trusted group of youth development professionals who helped develop this initiative come from community-based organizations (CBOs) with strong college access and success programs as well as operate summer camps where the young people would work. The CBOs would recruit the students and then follow them as part of their college success programs.

There was one more opportunity not to be missed—the creation of integrated college preparation workshops as part of the youth studies course, and taught by paid summer peer leaders. Dr. Lori Chajet worked with her team at College Access: Research and Action (CARA) – especially Shalema Henderson – to create the workshops and train the peer leaders. The result has been an impressive joint training including the professors and peer leaders.

With help from Alyssa Vine, the University Director of Credit for Prior Learning, CUNY's Office of Applied Research, Evaluation, and Data Analytics provided data for matriculation and persistence to assess impact on program participants.

The initiative grew in 2025 to include more CBOs: Children's Aid, Common Point, PENCIL, Henry Street Settlement, and Queens Community House. Work is already underway to broaden SYEP placements into other fields. Dr. Zeller-Berkman's youth studies program has adapted a policy course for initiative participants working in government agencies.

A special thank you to the Aronson Family Foundation for its support for the first two years of the initiative.

What a privilege it is to be a member of this incredible community of dedicated professionals, leveraging already existing solutions to develop something better. Young participants are amazed to be receiving college credits and getting paid too. Even better, they report using what they are learning in their course, the next day on the job. Happily, this new piece of work, woven by many hands, seems to be working.

Endnotes

1. Castleman, B. L., Page, L. C., & Snowdon, A. L. (2013). SDP Summer Melt Handbook: A Guide to Investigating and Responding to Summer Melt. Strategic Data Project. https://hwpi.harvard.edu/files/sdp/files/sdp-summer-melt-handbook_0.pdf
2. National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2022). High School Benchmarks: National College Progression Rates. https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022_HSBenchmarks-Report.pdf
3. See Patch, W. (2023). Effectiveness of Recruiting Travel and Campus Visits in 2023. <https://www.niche.com/about/enrollment-insights/effectiveness-recruiting-travel-campus-visits-2023/>; Britton, T. (2022). Dual Enrollment: Increasing College Access and Success Through Opportunities to Earn College Credits in High School <https://www.mdrc.org/work/publications/dual-enrollment-increasing-college-access-and-success-through-opportunities-earn> ; and Williams, C., Thornton, J., Hughes, E., & Fox, K. (2024). Expanding Internships: Harnessing Employer Insights to Boost Opportunity and Enhance Learning. Business-Higher Education Forum. https://www.bhef.com/sites/default/files/BHEF_Expanding_Internships.pdf
4. See Prasad, J. J., Showler, M. B., Ryan, A. M., Schmitt, N., & Nye, C. D. (2017). When belief precedes being: How attitudes and motivation before matriculation lead to fit and academic performance. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2017.02.003> ; and Saunders, M. & Chrisman, C. (2011). Linking Learning to the 21st Century: Preparing All Students for College, Career, and Civic Participation. Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED518181.pdf>
5. Gatta, M., Khan, J., Koncz, A. J., Galbraith, A., Sabogal, M., Longenberger, A. (2024). Job Outlook 2024. National Association of Colleges and Employers. <https://www.nacweb.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/2023/publication/research-report/2024-nace-job-outlook.pdf>
6. What New Research Tells Us About Students' Views on College. Gates Foundation. <https://washingtonstate.gatesfoundation.org/news-and-insights/what-new-research-tells-us-about-students-views-on-college>
7. Mowreader, A. (2024). Survey: Experiential Learning Helps Young People Identify Career Paths. Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/student-success/life-after-college/2024/09/23/career-learning-improves-high-schoolers-hope>
8. Castleman, B. L., Page, L. C., & Snowdon, A. L. (2013). SDP Summer Melt Handbook: A Guide to Investigating and Responding to Summer Melt. Strategic Data Project. https://hwpi.harvard.edu/files/sdp/files/sdp-summer-melt-handbook_0.pdf
9. National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2025). Persistence and Retention: Fall 2023 Beginning Postsecondary Student Cohort <https://nscresearchcenter.org/persistence-retention/>
10. The five credits are awarded through Lehman College.
11. Castleman, B. L., Page, L. C., & Snowdon, A. L. (2013). SDP Summer Melt Handbook: A Guide to Investigating and Responding to Summer Melt. Strategic Data Project. https://hwpi.harvard.edu/files/sdp/files/sdp-summer-melt-handbook_0.pdf
12. National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2025). Persistence and Retention: Fall 2023 Beginning Postsecondary Student Cohort <https://nscresearchcenter.org/persistence-retention/>
13. CUNY Office of Applied Research, Evaluation, and Data Analytics. CUNY Student Data Book. <https://insights.cuny.edu/t/CUNYGuest/views/StudentDataBook/Enrollment?%3Aembed=y&%3AisGuestRedirectFromVizportal=y>
14. National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2024). Yearly Progress and Completion. <https://nscresearchcenter.org/yearly-progress-and-completion/>
15. Results from a survey of summer 2024 participants.
16. State of the State [New York] (2025). <https://www.governor.ny.gov/sites/default/files/2025-01/2025StateoftheStateBook.pdf>

The Pinkerton Foundation

