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LeadHerWay Workforce Experiential Lab Series: Reality Town® – Career Pathways & Financial Literacy

A Community-Based Youth Workforce Development Initiative by Women of Toledo

Project Goals and Objectives

Building on the success of the LeadHerWay Youth Summit: *Reality Town® – Real Life. Real Choices in the Fall 2025*, Women of Toledo (WOT) and its youth division, Young Women of Toledo (YWOT), will launch in 2026 the **Experiential Lab Series** a quarterly, 3-hour seminar providing hands-on workforce development and financial literacy training across Lucas County neighborhoods. Each lab session will serve at least **40 youth ages 14–26**, reaching more than **160 participants annually** (quarterly programming) through localized, community-accessible programming.

Modeled after the **Reality Town® R.E.A.L. Simulation Curriculum**, now licensed locally by WOT, each Lab immerses youth in real-world financial and career decision-making scenarios. Participants assume the role of working adults managing paychecks, transportation, housing, childcare, and budgeting helping them understand the link between education, employment, and lifestyle choices. Guided by HR professionals and workforce mentors, youth develop essential technical, financial, and interpersonal skills needed for job readiness and long-term economic stability.

The program's overarching goal is to **equip Greater Toledo-area youth particularly from underrepresented communities with the foundational skills, confidence, and readiness needed to secure sustainable employment and contribute to the regional economy.**

To achieve this, the Labs deliver a sequence of integrated learning experiences:

- **Job readiness instruction**, including résumé development, interview coaching, and workplace etiquette.
- **Career exploration**, supported by mentorship with HR leaders, business professionals, and higher education partners who introduce participants to education pathways and professional networks.
- **Financial literacy**, reinforced through experiential budgeting, saving, and spending simulations.
- **Leadership and civic engagement**, strengthened through guided reflection, peer collaboration, and self-advocacy activities.

Learning Outcomes includes:

- Understand how **career and education choices** directly **impact income and quality of life**.
- Practice **budgeting**, banking, saving, and spending within real financial constraints.
- Build **confidence** navigating employment conversations, workplace expectations, and negotiation.

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- Strengthen decision-making, critical thinking, self-advocacy, and leadership awareness.
- Reflect on trade-offs between **needs, wants, values**, and long-term goals.

Population to Be Served

The Experiential Lab Series will serve **youth ages 14–26** from four historically under-resourced Toledo neighborhoods in partnership with four **Toledo-Lucas County Public Library** branches. Each quarterly Lab rotates among these community hubs to ensure equitable geographic access, reduce transportation barriers, and foster neighborhood-based ownership.

Target Neighborhoods & Library Partners:

- **Old West End – Kent Branch Library**
Engages youth from a vibrant yet economically diverse community facing persistent underemployment and limited exposure to structured workforce programming.
- **East Toledo – Mott Branch Library**
Serves youth in neighborhoods experiencing high unemployment and limited access to career development opportunities.
- **South Toledo – Broadway Corridor**
Engages youth from a historically industrial and working-class corridor experiencing economic transition, workforce dislocation, and limited access to career navigation supports. Programming in this area focuses on rebuilding pathways to stable employment, financial resilience, and upward mobility while reconnecting youth to emerging industries, local employers, and skills-based training opportunities.
- **North Toledo – Lagrange Branch Library**
Supports multicultural, immigrant, and refugee youth through culturally responsive programming and English-language support.
- **West Toledo – West Toledo Branch Library**
Connects youth near the university corridor to postsecondary, certification, and apprenticeship pathways.

Each site will engage a minimum of **40 youth per Lab**, totaling **160+ annually**, representing diverse backgrounds across race, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and schooling experience. Priority populations include:

- Low- to moderate-income youth.
- First-generation students.
- Emerging leaders lacking structured guidance and mentorship.

Evaluation Criteria

Evaluation of the Workforce Lab Series will follow an **outcomes-based framework** aligned with WOT's three pillars—Educate, Engage, Empower—and supported by a logic model and outcomes matrix. The evaluation will measure growth in job readiness,

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financial literacy, mentorship engagement, and leadership development while assessing how effectively the neighborhood-based model expands access for underserved youth.

Targets include:

- 80% demonstrating increased job readiness and confidence
- 90% engaging with HR mentors or industry professionals
- 75% improving financial literacy post-assessment scores
- 70% participating in leadership and reflection activities

A **mixed-methods approach** will combine:

- Pre/post assessments
- Attendance and engagement tracking
- Youth focus groups and reflection circles
- Mentor and partner feedback surveys
- Participant case studies

Quarterly reviews with WOT leadership and library partners will guide refinement. An annual report will summarize outcomes, demographic trends, and recommendations for scaling and sustainability.

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Impact and Outcomes: Testimonial from our Year 2025 Reality Town Series

Youth Participant Testimonial

“Reality Town helped me understand what adult life actually looks like. Before this program, I didn’t realize how my career choices, paycheck, and everyday decisions all connect. Managing a budget, talking to mentors, and dealing with real-life expenses made me think differently about my future. I left feeling more confident, more prepared, and motivated to make smarter choices for my education and career.”

—Youth Participant

Mentor / HR Professional Testimonial

“As an HR professional, I was impressed by how quickly the youth engaged with real-world workforce concepts. The Reality Town simulation created an environment where participants asked thoughtful questions, practiced communication, and made informed decisions under real constraints. This program doesn’t just teach financial literacy—it builds confidence, self-awareness, and job readiness in a way that feels relevant and empowering.” — Workforce Mentor & HR Professional

Parent / Guardian Testimonial

“After attending the summit, my daughter came home talking about budgeting, saving, and career goals in a way I had never heard before. She was excited, reflective, and more aware of the responsibilities that come with adulthood. This program opened important conversations in our home and gave her tools I wish I had learned much earlier.” — Parent

Mentor / HR Professional Testimonial (2025)

“Working with youth from the South End area, I saw firsthand how powerful it is to bring workforce education directly into the neighborhood. Many participants had never been walked through budgeting, career pathways, or workplace expectations in a practical way. Reality Town made those concepts real. By the end of the session, youth were more confident asking questions, thinking long-term, and seeing themselves as part of the future workforce.” — Workforce Mentor & HR Professional

Parent / Guardian Testimonial (2025)

“Programs like this are needed. After attending my child talked openly about money, saving, and what kind of job he want after school. It helped him see that there are options beyond what he see every day.” — Parent

Mentor / HR Professional Testimonial (2025)

“In East Toledo, many youth don’t get consistent exposure to career planning or financial education. The simulation sparked meaningful conversations about income, transportation, and housing choices, things they will face soon. As a mentor, I could see the shift in confidence and awareness happening in real time.” — Workforce Mentor & HR Professional

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Curriculum Delivery: 3-Hour Lab Structure (180 Minutes)

1. Welcome & Career Framing

Time: 0:00–0:20 (20 minutes)

Objective: Anchor youth in purpose, possibility, and context.

Activities:

- Welcome and orientation to the Workforce Lab
- Overview of career pathways, income ranges, and education options
- Participants are assigned:
 - A **career role**
 - A **salary/paystub**
 - A basic **life profile** (household status, transportation needs, etc.)

Outcome: Youth understand the connection between career selection, earning potential, and life responsibilities before entering the simulation.

2. Workforce Readiness & Mentorship Circles

Time: 0:20–1:05 (45 minutes)

Objective: Build job readiness, confidence, and professional self-awareness.

Activities (rotational or facilitated as one group depending on size):

- Career exploration and workforce expectations
- Mock interview questions and communication practice
- Introduction to salary, benefits, and negotiation concepts
- HR professionals and mentors provide real-time coaching

Outcome: Youth gain exposure to professional norms, self-advocacy tools, and employment realities that inform later financial decisions.

3. Reality Town® Smart Spending Simulation

Time: 1:05–2:30 (85 minutes)

Objective: Apply financial literacy through experiential decision-making.

Simulation Experience:

Participants manage a full monthly budget using their assigned income while rotating through Reality Town® stations, including:

- Banking & savings
- Housing & utilities
- Transportation (car ownership vs. public transit)
- Insurance & healthcare
- Groceries & household expenses
- Philanthropy and community giving
- Savings, investment, and retirement planning
- Life events and unexpected costs are “Just My Luck”

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- Wants vs. needs decision points

Youth track spending in check registers, balance budgets, and experience the consequences of financial choices in real time.

Outcome: Participants internalize how daily decisions, emergencies, and long-term planning affect financial stability and lifestyle sustainability.

4. Reflection, Leadership & Takeaways

Time: 2:30–3:00 (30 minutes)

Objective: Convert experience into insight, agency, and future action.

Activities:

- Guided reflection circles with mentors
- Group discussion on:
 - What surprised them
 - What trade-offs were hardest
 - How career choice affected outcomes
- Leadership and self-advocacy prompts
- Completion of reflection tools and goal-setting exercises

Outcome: Youth leave with clarity, confidence, and a stronger sense of control over their future decisions—academically, professionally, and financially.

Session Value Proposition

This 3-hour lab functions as a **high-impact workforce accelerator**—compressing years of lived financial lessons into one structured, supportive environment. The design ensures:

- Scalable, neighborhood-based delivery
- Cross-sector mentor engagement
- Measurable outcomes in job readiness and financial literacy
- Immediate relevance to youth lived experience

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Budget Narrative

The **total program budget of \$32,000** will support quarterly Reality Town Labs serving 160 youth across four neighborhoods.

Funds cover:

- **Personnel (3 staffs salaries):** Program Manager, Youth Coordinator, outreach staff: \$32,000
- **Reality Town® curriculum workbooks:** \$5,000
- **Printing & materials:** \$1,000 (signage, office supplies)
- **Simulation booth setup:** \$3,000
- **Participant kits (T-shirt, drawstring bag, certificate):** \$1,600
- **Food & refreshments:** \$2,400

With volunteer mentors and in-kind venue support, **per-youth cost averages \$250** making the program highly cost-effective while maximizing experiential impact.

For more information about this overview please contact:

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