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X3 and X3 NeXt Internship Evaluation Report

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Summary

Future Focused Education’s X3 and X3 Next paid internship programs cultivate meaningful interpersonal and professional growth for both mentors and interns, while creating career pathways and economic opportunities for young people of color. By investing in and nurturing young people, the program strengthens community connections and builds the skills they need to serve and lead within their own communities.

Key Takeaways

X3 Internships Foster Mentor Growth and Leadership

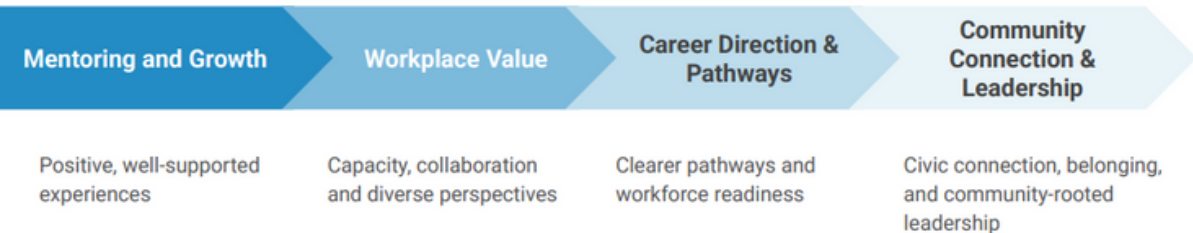
Mentors described the X3 and X3 NeXt internships as positive, well-supported experiences that benefit both young people and the organizations that host them. Interns gained confidence, skills, and clarity about future career paths, while mentors reported professional growth due to supervising and supporting interns. Mentors also valued the opportunity to support the growth of young people from similar racial and economic backgrounds, underscoring their commitment to mentorship and community investment.

X3 Internships Strengthen Workplace Collaboration & Workforce Development

At the organizational level, interns made meaningful contributions to teams by adding capacity, strengthening collaboration, and bringing diverse perspectives into the workplace. Mentors increasingly viewed internships as pathways to future employment for youth and as a means of workforce development, particularly in healthcare, education, and community-serving roles.

X3 Internships Reinforce Connections to Local Communities

In some settings, these impacts extended beyond individual organizations. Mentors described how internships supported civic connection and helped create pathways for young people whose backgrounds reflect the communities they serve, contributing to longer-term community capacity and leadership.



About This Evaluation

This evaluation examines mentors' perspectives on the impacts of engaging with young people through FFE's X3, X3 Northern New Mexico (NNM), and X3 NeXt internship programs. The guiding evaluation question was:

What impacts do employer partners perceive as a result of engaging with young people through the program?

The evaluation used a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative insights, including mentor interviews, intern and mentor midpoint and endpoint surveys, and program documentation such as anonymized case notes. For more details on methodology, refer to the Appendix.

Note: All employers participating in this evaluation also served as mentors to interns. That's why we use the term *mentor* throughout the report.

Mentor-Perceived X3 Internship Impacts

The findings are organized to reflect organizations' overall experiences with the program and the different levels at which impacts emerge.

We begin with general experience and satisfaction, as well as program structures and supports, which set the context for how the internships operate in practice.

We then explore impacts across four levels:

- **Individual impacts**
- **Organizational impacts**
- **Workforce development impacts**
- **Community impacts**

Section	Guiding Question	What This Section Covers
General Experience & Program Structure	What is it like to participate in the program?	Overall satisfaction, communication, staff support, preparation, and program design
Individual & Interpersonal Impact	What changed for people?	Skills, confidence, mentoring relationships, and personal fulfillment
Organizational Impact	What changed at worksites?	Workplace culture, staff morale, collaboration, leadership, and capacity
Workforce Development Impact	Where does this lead?	Career pathways and clarity, exposure, pipelines, credentials, and workforce opportunities
Community Impact	What changed beyond the organization?	Civic connection, local workforce strengthening, ripple effects

Findings draw on qualitative interviews with mentors and survey data from mentors and interns, including midpoint and endpoint surveys. These data sources provide complementary perspectives on how the X3, X3 NNM, and X3 NeXt programs are experienced and where impacts are most visible.

General Experience and Satisfaction

Fall 2025 Session: X3 By the Numbers



Mentors Feel X3 Internships Are Meaningful, Positive Experiences

Mentors consistently described their experience with the X3 and X3 NeXt programs as positive, meaningful, and mutually beneficial.

Mentors emphasized **how rewarding it is to actively guide young people, providing them with essential skills, industry insights, and career direction.**

“It’s a privilege to be able to [host these interns]. We hope they learn just as much, if not more than we learn from them. It’s a great opportunity for everyone.” - Mentor Survey

A significant number of mentors expressed genuine appreciation for interns' high level of engagement and interest, noting that this enthusiasm contributes to a dynamic and productive work environment.

"I really value how the program gives students meaningful hands-on experience and allows them to develop real workplace skills, especially in a fast-paced environment like healthcare."

I appreciate the support from the Future Focused team, the focus on student growth, and the opportunity to help young learners gain confidence and understand professional expectations."

It's rewarding to see interns become more independent and build skills that will help them in any career path."
- Mentor Survey

To complement interview insights, survey data provide a snapshot of mentor satisfaction with key elements of program structure, communication, and support. Consistent positive mentor responses, from the midpoint through the end of the internship, suggest that satisfaction and perceived benefits were sustained over time rather than limited to early engagement.

The chart below highlights that satisfaction was consistently high across respondents in all areas.

Mentors Are Highly Satisfied with Core Program Supports

X3 and X3 NeXt Program Structure Supports Mentors

Mentors identified several program structures and supports that have contributed to a successful experience.

- **Balanced Communication and Transparency:** Mentors reported feeling comfortable reaching out to program staff at any time while still having sufficient autonomy to offer flexible schedules and opportunities for interns.
- **Ongoing Staff Support:** Support from coaches, coordinators, and staff was consistently noted as a strength. Mentors describe the FFE team as responsive to questions and proactive in providing needed information and support.
- **Strong Foundational Preparation:** The program's orientation and background preparation reduced the need for mentors to establish basic workplace expectations with interns. This groundwork helps the interns enter the workplace with a clear understanding of professional norms.

"Future Focused makes it so easy. It seems daunting and like it'd be so much extra to take on, but it's not. It's actually just a really cool experience, and we really appreciate Future Focused for doing that. I think that's all good. The bad and the ugly. I think I only have the good." - Mentor Interview

Individual Impact

Internships Foster Mentor Growth and Skill Development

The X3 Internship Program helped mentors develop several key skills. Internships offer meaningful opportunities for mentors to **build and strengthen leadership and supervisory capacity**. Mentors improved their ability to plan for and pivot to different skill sets as the intern advanced, and became more creative in tailoring opportunities to benefit both the individual intern and the team. These skills are important, particularly as mentors transition into management and supervisory roles.

Mentors also became more organized and effective at creating **individualized work plans** that incorporate interns' interests, strengths, and areas for improvement, as well as opportunities within the organization.

Another significant skill gained was the **ability to teach at different levels**. As one mentor explained, the experience required them to "continuously assess the level of knowledge that a person has and then tailor how I teach and educate them," which also involved consciously deciding which staff member was best positioned to provide the necessary teaching and exposure for the intern's continued learning.

Based on survey responses from mentors, 89% (n=18) agree that the experience strengthened their supervisory skills.

“Supporting new learners reminds me to stay patient, offer constructive feedback, and create a safe space for questions. This mindset has positively shaped how I manage day-to-day interactions with staff and peers.

Seeing how [our intern] has grown when given responsibility has reinforced the value of empowering others. I've started delegating more intentionally and giving team members opportunities to take ownership of tasks.” - Mentor Survey

Mentors Guide and Support Interns

Mentor skill gains are mirrored in interns' experiences. Intern survey responses and reflections highlight the central role mentors play in providing guidance, support, and meaningful learning opportunities throughout the internship.

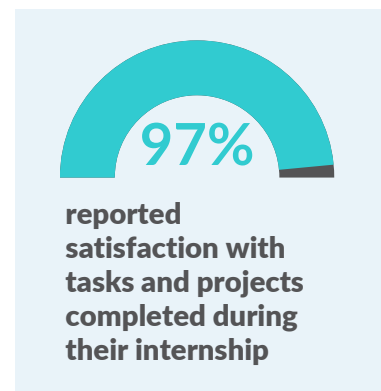


“[My mentor] has given me immediate direction and help with long-term planning.

We still work together on developing tasks and checking in on progress, but we also work on professional development.” - Intern Survey

“When it comes to work, [my mentor] encourages me a lot to ask questions and asks me what kind of things I'd like to learn about.

I appreciate her for what she teaches me at work, but also for the conversations we've had and things we've learned about each other.” - Intern Survey



Internships Connect Mentors with Young People

Mentors consistently shared a **strong passion for working with young people**.

One mentor reflected on having a similar organization visit their community when they were young, an experience that expanded their understanding of future possibilities, and emphasized the importance of now being able to provide that same opportunity for youth as an adult. Participation in the programs offers mentors meaningful opportunities to connect with youth.

"I'm thankful for being able to create [opportunities] for other people. It's a passion I have to be able to provide opportunities for young people, especially those that have come from the same background that I have (Hispanic and lower-income).

You don't get that exposure very much unless somebody steps in and says, 'Have you thought about this?' So it's really cool to be a part of that." - Mentor Interview

Mentors also noted that **working with young people broadens their perspectives and reinforces their commitment to youth-centered work, as well as strengthens their use of a youth-informed lens**.



of mentors reported learning something new about how to better support young people.

"The more experiences I have with young people, the more I learn about their needs and values, which assists me in advancing our company in providing these items to the next generation of employees. It is extremely satisfying to see a young person get excited about companies and careers in NM." - Mentor Survey

"One of my strongest values is to grow young people in our industry and keep jobs in NM. This program allows me another avenue to do that. "
- Mentor Survey

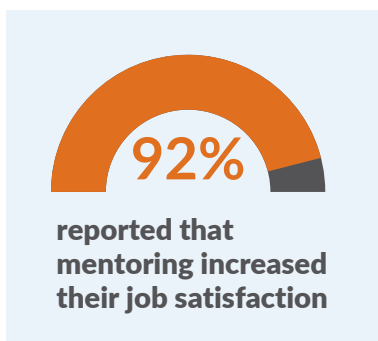


reported that mentoring resonated with their personal values

Organizational Impact

Internships Improve Staff Morale and Workplace Culture

Having an intern positively impacts staff morale. Staff have a sense of **fulfillment and job satisfaction** knowing that they are offering support to someone else. One mentor noted that the final exhibition was important to highlight for staff the impact the internship had on the young person.



“[After the intern’s presentation] our staff said, ‘Wow, I didn’t realize that I did that for someone.’ To them, the internship seemed day-to-day, but it made a difference in someone’s life. So it’s really good to be a part of that.”
- Mentor Interview

Morale is also improved because interns can provide **additional support with the workload**. While there can be a learning curve in incorporating interns into current workflows and tasks, ultimately, their presence and contributions end up making a big difference.

The added capacity interns bring can help address gaps and support busy and stretched teams. As a result, morale and satisfaction increase.

“[The intern] was able to provide some of that support that we [wished for]. It made a huge difference knowing that you have that person that’s there that can come and give additional education to the patient. Knowing that you have that additional support really improves staff morale because you have this well-rounded team that’s able to provide better patient care.”
- Mentor Interview

Additionally, the integration of interns **broadens the perspectives within an organization’s existing workforce**. Mentors report that their teams have deeply valued and benefited from the diversity of backgrounds, experiences, and viewpoints that these different interns bring.

“Everyone has different skill sets, knowledge bases, even things from their culture. Sometimes [interns] come with the gift of being bilingual and bringing that to the table. The more diverse of a group you have, the more rich and more diverse contributions you have. So it’s just a stronger team that provides a lot of good things.” - **Mentor Interview**

Representation Matters

Beyond strengthening teams internally, mentors emphasized the importance of creating pathways for young people whose backgrounds reflect the communities they serve. One mentor described intentionally aligning staff demographics with those of the community, noting that shared lived experience, language, and cultural understanding strengthen trust and connection.

By supporting interns from communities that have been historically and systematically excluded from education and workforce opportunities, the X3 and X3 NeXt programs expand who sees themselves as belonging in these roles—and who communities see reflected in the systems meant to serve them.

"One of the things we've really enjoyed is the diversity of all the [interns] from FFE. [Different people have different needs] and it's not a one size fits all thing."

- Mentor Interview

Internships Encourage Team Collaboration & Leadership Development

While interns may work closely with their mentors and receive guidance, they also engage with other team members. Engaging with interns and ensuring they have a successful experience leads to **intentional collaboration among staff**. Teams need to get organized, delegate work to the intern, and divide up time and tasks.

Integrating interns onto the team and maintaining clear organization and communication also requires intentional effort and active management by mentors. The process strengthens mentors' leadership and management skills.

"We've had more than one mentor working with an FFE intern. That involves communication between both staff members about assignments, structure, and how they're going to divide time and tasks. [The experience] supported [team] communication and collaboration in that way."

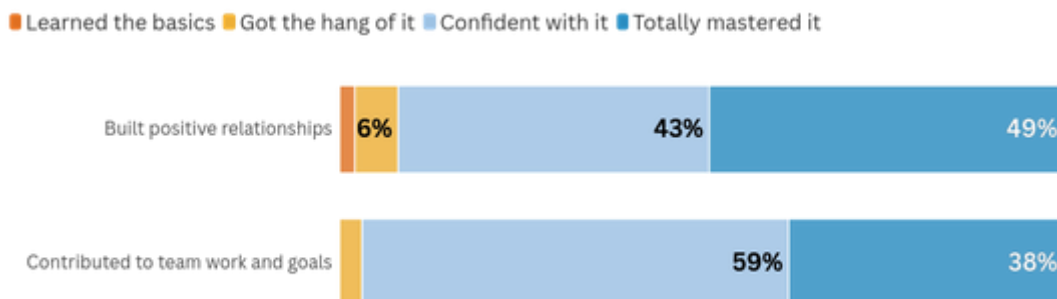
- Mentor Interview

Additionally, the experience can be a **learning opportunity for younger team members**, as they gain experience mentoring, giving direction, or delegating to others. Learning about what works well and what's frustrating can help with communication and aid in their own professional development.

"I've occasionally had our young staff task our interns with things and afterward they'll provide me feedback about how frustrating it was that the intern didn't get it the first time. Because I do think it's actually really beneficial for a young staff member to mentor because I think they often see that those things that they're not necessarily doing for me are the same things that the [intern] is not necessarily doing for them." - Mentor Interview

Intern survey responses and reflections highlight their experiences **building positive relationships and working collaboratively as part of a team during the internship**. The experience provides opportunities to develop interpersonal skills and navigate team dynamics in the workplace.

Interns Report Building Relationships and Contributing to Workplace Goals



"The two areas where I've improved the most and feel the most proud of are my communication and my ability to ask for help when I need it. At the beginning, I sometimes hesitated to speak up or ask questions because I didn't want to bother anyone or seem unsure. Over time, I learned that clear communication is essential not only for my own success, but also for the success of the team." - Intern Survey

Internships Provide Innovation, Additional Capacity, and Efficiency

Interns contribute a fresh, external, and younger perspective that significantly benefits the organization by enhancing community engagement, refining workflows, and adding capacity for tasks staff typically lack time for.

Fresh Perspectives Drive Innovation

One mentor shared that an intern's input about a lack of website information led to a large initiative highlighting one of their programs. They value this outsider view.

"We all want an outsider perspective even if we're not in an outward-facing role. We all want to know what young people are thinking. So [our intern] helped to get input on what seemed interesting, what seemed confusing, and what [young people] wanted to find out more about." - Mentor Interview

Improved Training and Onboarding

Engaging with interns who have diverse interests and knowledge levels helps organizations improve their introductory training programs for both new interns and permanent employees. As one mentor noted, "Participating in [the X3 program] has helped us hone our tools and be more effective at initial training."

Capacity for Essential Support Tasks

Interns can handle small but essential tasks and projects that often go undone, such as developing marketing graphics or back-end software improvements that streamline workflows. For instance, a mentor shared that when an intern sends "reminder text messages for our group members every Monday. That may seem small, but it's really important because those are really what brings people into our grieving groups to get support. When you're grieving, you can easily forget dates and times and appointments."

"I'm genuinely very grateful for the X3 program. Personally, it takes some stress off of our team so that we can attend to other things." - Mentor Survey

Workforce Development Impact

As individual growth, mentoring relationships, and organizational capacity come together, mentors begin to see the X3 and X3 NeXt internships as more than short-term learning experiences. Instead, internships function as pathways—helping young people clarify career direction, explore fields that require additional training, and, in some cases, move directly into credentials or employment. The impacts described below reflect mentor perspectives on how internships shape longer-term workforce trajectories.

Internships Clarify Career Pathways and Next Steps

Mentors shared that hosting interns often helps **young people gain greater clarity about potential career directions**. Through hands-on experience, interns are exposed to the realities of different roles, expectations, and work environments, which supports more informed decision-making about future education and career plans.



"This internship has allowed me to gain the hands-on part of teaching which has shown me children are easy to love! They are hilarious and sometimes brutally honest. It has also allowed me to fall more in love with the education field. Interning at the National Audubon Society has made me realize it is not always about money but about the love and joy for the students."
- Intern Survey

In surveys, 86% (n=48) of mentors reported that participating in the program was very *valuable* professionally, with an additional 13% (n=7) indicating it was *somewhat valuable*. Mentors also noted that mentoring young people is viewed positively within their organizations and can influence professional trajectories.



"I would say that mentoring is looked on positively by peers and leadership in my department and across departments, definitely."
- Mentor Interview

Internships Build Local Talent Pipelines

The X3 and X3 NeXt programs are highly valued by interns and mentors for their **effectiveness in addressing crucial workforce needs**, particularly in the healthcare and education sectors.

One mentor noted that the program equips interns with "real, tangible skills" that at times surpass those of college graduates, providing a competitive edge and building a pipeline of interested and skilled workers. The program is also seen as a vital tool for mitigating the healthcare worker shortage, which is crucial for those striving "to serve so many patients."

Professionally, mentors highlighted the value of their mentoring work and the satisfaction of "seeing that there are new employees in the making."

One mentor described how an intern completed training, supported families in connecting to community resources and services, obtained a navigator license through the city, and ultimately secured employment with a partner organization. The intern continues to pursue contract work and now has access to multiple job opportunities in the community, illustrating how internships can translate into longer-term workforce outcomes.

"I've known teachers who have never worked in a classroom. They've got their degree, they get their license and they go into the classroom and they say, 'Oh my God, I hate this'.

Mentorship has a big potential for helping people get into the reality of what ECE is. If they enjoy it, then it's a pathway for education and a degree that belongs to them for the rest of their life." - **Mentor Interview**

Internships Create Different Pathways

The X3 and X3 NeXt internships create pathways to careers that require additional time or specialized training, especially in early childhood education (ECE). There are concerted efforts to build an education workforce, as evidenced by statewide grants to provide ECE, which in turn lead to competitive salaries.

Mentorship programs can serve as a pipeline to expose youth to career paths and provide them with the experience they need to determine whether it's the right fit..

"[The internship] has made me want to pursue a career in medicine even more because I want to make people feel seen and heard by helping them with their health." - **Intern Survey**

“That's what we're doing when we allow young people to come in and experience the different possibilities in terms of career. The more that they're aware of, the more they're exposed to, the more options they have and the more of a clear and broad view they have of all the possibilities in this world. Sometimes we choose things because we only know so much and we're narrow minded or focused. It's not really our fault or their fault, it's just because we haven't been exposed to it.” - Mentor Interview

Community Impact

Beyond individual growth and organizational change, some mentors described impacts that extend into the broader community. These impacts reflect how internships can strengthen local workforce capacity, deepen civic connection, and support the flow of knowledge and resources beyond the worksite.

Internships Strengthen Community Ties and Civic Engagement

In addition to workforce development outcomes, most mentors underscored the value of the internships in strengthening communities. By supporting individuals from the community to serve in healthcare, education, government, or civic roles, the internships help ensure that those closest to the community are positioned to make an impact and share back knowledge with their friends and family. Overall, 92% (n=60) of interns agreed that their participation helped them feel more connected to their community.

Mentors described how interns gain a broader understanding of public service, community needs, and civic responsibility through their placements.

“Everything we do and that the intern does is in service to everyone who lives in the city of Albuquerque ... It kind of helps to reinforce that this is what your government is supposed to do and this is how your government serves you. And right now you're in your government serving your community.

I think that just the general big picture view is the biggest catalyst in change and the thought process [around civic engagement].” - Mentor Interview

Mentors also noted that interns often become informal ambassadors for the organizations and services they engage with, sharing information with friends and family and extending the reach of community-based work.

"Just being here, the [interns] learn what grief is, or what types of services we offer to families. Then they go into the community with their friends or family members and they can explain it to their own families. It's a [ripple effect] and the grief education and normalization happens after that." - Mentor Interview

Where Community Impact Varies

While some mentors described broader community impacts, not all observed these effects to the same degree. Experiences varied by field, organization type, and role, with some placements offering more direct opportunities for community engagement than others. This variation suggests that community-level impacts may be more visible in certain sectors or settings and may also emerge over a longer time horizon than individual or organizational impacts.

Challenges

While mentors overwhelmingly described positive experiences, they also identified several challenges that shaped implementation and may influence future participation of their organization.

Intern Engagement

Some interns were inconsistent in attendance or engagement, creating additional work to adjust the timeline and expectations alongside existing job responsibilities. In some cases, interns were dissatisfied when their roles did not align with initial expectations or interests. Others lacked the skills or foundational knowledge needed to contribute meaningfully, making it difficult to identify engaging tasks for them.

Schedule and Administrative Challenges

Conflicts between intern schedules and organizational hours made it difficult to plan training, assign tasks, and ensure progress. Mentors and interns also reported difficulties using the ImBlaze system for time tracking, including delayed access, inaccurate time entries, and an inability to edit.

Policy Constraints

In early childhood education settings, age-related regulations limited interns' responsibilities. For example, interns under 18 were not permitted to work independently with children, so mentors had to adjust plans and identify alternative, meaningful tasks.

Work Culture and Fit

One mentor noted that their organizational culture differed from program expectations, particularly regarding the use of icebreakers or other social-emotional learning approaches. This difference in work culture may require additional adjustment for interns.

Sustainability

One mentor at a nonprofit organization noted that limited financial resources make participation dependent on grant funding, which would otherwise be a barrier to involvement.

Despite challenges, these findings suggest that the **X3 and X3 NeXt internships create value not only for interns, but for mentors, organizations, and communities**—particularly when paid, supported work-based learning is intentionally designed and aligned with local context.

Purpose and Importance of Paid Internships

There is strong evidence that internships play a meaningful role in supporting college students and transition-age youth as they move from education into the workforce. National employer data show that **internships are a primary pathway into entry-level jobs**, with employers consistently prioritizing prior internship experience and demonstrated skills over GPA or academic major.^{1 2}

Research on career pathways and sector-based workforce programs further shows that **structured work experiences during this transition period are associated with higher employment and credential attainment rates**, particularly among young adults ages 18–24.³ For these youth, internships function as bridges into professional networks, clearer career pathways, and sustained employment.

This evidence aligns closely with X3 NeXt program goals, which serve youth who have completed high school and are navigating a pivotal moment in defining their career direction.

By contrast, national data on high school internships, especially paid models, are far more limited. Most large-scale internship datasets focus on college students and do not systematically capture high school participation or outcomes. While rigorous research shows that career-focused high school models with work-based learning can improve long-term earnings and employment⁴, fewer studies isolate the effects of internships alone at this stage.

Making Internships More Equitable

Paid internship programs like X3 are crucial to make internship opportunities more equitable. Unpaid or informal work experiences tend to advantage students with financial resources and existing professional networks, while paid internships expand access for students who need income and structured support.

Employer-reported data show that **internship participation, particularly in paid roles, does not fully reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of the broader student population, reinforcing the need for intentional, paid internship models.**⁵

X3 internship programs respond to both what the evidence clearly supports and where it is still emerging. X3 NeXt builds on a strong foundation of research on internships for transition-age youth, while X3 extends paid, mentored work experiences to high school students, when career awareness and opportunity structures are first taking shape.

Recommendations

The following recommendations build on mentor feedback and are intended to strengthen what is already working while addressing areas for continued learning and improvement.

1 Support Mentor Participation & Sustainability

Strengthen Messaging to Support Participation

Mentors emphasized the need for **focused messaging to address financial barriers**, particularly within early childhood education settings. One mentor noted that nonprofit organizations could likely not afford to host a mentee without external funding.

They suggested exploring a pilot partnership with the New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department to support paid mentee placements as a strategy to build and sustain the early childhood workforce. Additional messaging could highlight the program's return on investment, for example, by emphasizing that a modest financial investment can provide consistent weekly support that alleviates classroom workload.

2 Strengthen the Mentor & Intern Experience

Enhance Mentor Training and Supports

Mentors recommended building on existing supports by increasing structure and clarity throughout the internship process. Suggestions included implementing a more structured schedule or guide for intern development, such as a weekly check-in or a joint review, with questions aligned with the Interprofessional Education Collaborative competencies.

Support Alignment Between Internship Practices & Workplace Norms

Mentors noted the importance of clearer guidance prior to internship start to ensure interns fully understand program expectations, roles, and timelines. Workplace cultures vary across industries, and in some settings, approaches commonly used in the internship model (such as social-emotional learning or reflective practices) may feel unfamiliar or align differently with established norms.

Creating space for early and ongoing conversations among program staff, mentors, and interns about workplace expectations and communication styles can help reduce discomfort and build shared understanding. This includes clearly articulating the purpose of social-emotional and relational practices within the program and identifying strategies for adapting activities to different organizational contexts.

Continue Centering Equity in Placement Decisions

Mentors highlighted the value of internships that reflect the demographics and lived experiences of the communities they serve. Continuing to center equity and representation in placement decisions may strengthen trust, belonging, and long-term community impact.

3 Improve System and Administrative Processes

Clarify Administrative and Payment Processes

Several mentors requested clearer information and training related to intern payment processes, particularly for organizations hosting interns for the first time. This includes guidance on onboarding steps, required paperwork, and timelines for payment.

Improve Timekeeping System Flexibility

Mentors suggested increasing the flexibility of the ImBlaze timekeeping system to allow adjustments before approval. This could reduce administrative friction and better reflect the realities of intern schedules.

Acknowledgements

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We are grateful for the time, insight, and generosity of the youth interns, X3 and X3 NeXt internship coaches, mentors, and Future Focused Education staff who shared their experiences and perspectives. Their reflections and expertise shaped the findings of this report, and reflect a deep commitment to creating workplaces across New Mexico where young people feel welcomed, supported, and able to grow.

We also extend our sincere thanks to Grace Granillo and Brisa Rodriguez for their leadership, care, and ongoing dedication to supporting young people. Their thoughtful partnership and commitment to learning continue to strengthen opportunities for youth across the state.

Appendices

About Future Focus Education and Paid Internships

Future Focused Education (FFE) is a New Mexico-based nonprofit organization working to co-create systems of equity that support healthier, more prosperous communities for those who need it most.

Founded in Albuquerque, FFE operates in a context where many young people—particularly youth of color and those from historically underserved communities—face persistent barriers to completing high school and accessing meaningful post-secondary and career opportunities.

FFE works across students, schools, districts, communities, and state systems to strengthen career pathways that are rooted in local context, youth voice, and community-defined priorities.

Its mission is to advance high-quality, equitable education by partnering with communities to redesign learning experiences that connect education, well-being, and economic opportunity. FFE envisions schools as sites of innovation where young people are co-creators of thriving communities, not just recipients of services.

FFE's work is guided by four interconnected practices that shape its programs and partnerships:

- **Community Partnerships** that honor local wisdom and position communities as leaders in shaping education and workforce solutions.
- **Communities of Care and Well-Being** that recognize young people as assets who thrive when supported by environments that foster belonging, agency, and holistic development.
- **Learning by Doing** that includes project-based and community-engaged learning that connects academic content to real-world challenges.
- **Work-Based Learning** that creates paid, meaningful opportunities for young people to build skills, social capital, and career clarity while contributing to their communities.

About X3 and X3 NeXt Internship Programs

FFE's X3 and X3 NeXt internship programs implement these principles through paid, work-based learning experiences that support young people's transition from school to career.

Both programs are designed in partnership with local mentors, schools, and community organizations and prioritize youth who have historically had limited access to paid internships and professional networks.

- **X3 Internships** serve high school students, providing early workforce exposure while students remain enrolled in school. Interns typically work up to 12 hours per week and receive wages, mentorship, and ongoing support from FFE staff.
- **X3 Northern New Mexico** serves high school students in less populated areas of the state, providing real-world opportunities that ultimately build local talent in the area.
- **X3 NeXt Internships** are designed to support transition-age youth, including individuals who have completed high school or obtained a GED and those who do not hold a degree. The program offers deeper career exploration and skill development through internships of up to 25 hours per week.

Across both programs, interns are paired with workplace mentors and supported by FFE coaches who work with youth, mentors, and school partners to ensure high-quality experiences aligned with interns' interests, strengths, and future goals. Internships are offered during fall, spring, and summer sessions and may take place in individual or group settings, either in-person or in hybrid formats, depending on the placement.

Evaluation Approach & Methods

This evaluation was designed as a timely, utilization-focused learning effort, with a strong emphasis on close collaboration between Apex Evaluation and Future Focused Education (FFE). Early in the process, our teams aligned on the purpose of the work and identified mentor perspectives as a particularly valuable lens. Mentors interact with young people in real-world settings and can offer important insights into both intern growth and the broader impacts of the X3 and X3 NeXt internships on workplaces.

Apex and FFE co-created the evaluation question and the mentor interview protocol, with input from X3 program staff to ensure the questions reflected program realities and learning priorities. The guiding evaluation question was:

- **What impacts do employer partners perceive as a result of engaging with young people through the program?**

We used a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative insights from mentor interviews with existing program data. FFE conducted five semi-structured interviews with mentors who were given \$50 as a thank-you for their participation. These interviews were complemented by programmatic data, including midpoint and endpoint surveys of interns and mentors (midpoint: 56 mentor and 68 intern responses; endpoint: 37 mentor and 65 intern responses), as well as program case notes that capture ongoing observations and reflections.

FFE conducted and recorded the mentor interviews and shared the recordings securely with Apex. Apex uploaded the recordings into Condens, a qualitative analysis platform, where interviews were coded and analyzed.

To support shared understanding and avoid misinterpretation, Apex and FFE held a sense-making session to review emerging themes together, surface key takeaways, and ensure that findings were grounded in the program context. Apex drafted the report and shared it with FFE staff for review, incorporating feedback into the final version.

Positionality Statements

We are including positionality statements from the Apex team members who contributed to this report as a way to challenge traditional notions of objectivity in evaluation. Positionality acknowledges how our identities, experiences, and perspectives influence our approach to evaluation, shaping how we interpret data, engage with clients, and frame conclusions. By making these assumptions and biases visible, we aim to strengthen the integrity and credibility of our work and demonstrate our commitment to equity, inclusivity, transparency, and shared learning.

Dominique Pierre

I am a Black Latina, cisgender, able-bodied woman born and raised in New Jersey. As a first-generation American, I was raised by Haitian and Dominican immigrant parents, both of whom hold higher education degrees. I grew up with economic privilege and access to higher education, which have shaped my opportunities. I view my role as an evaluator as one of facilitation rather than expertise. My work is to assist communities and participants in telling their stories on their own terms, ensuring that their voices are at the forefront of the process. This includes co-creation of evaluation questions, data collection tools, and analysis/drafting of findings.

Lenka Berkowitz

My vision is to evolve evaluation toward belonging—creating spaces where people feel seen, valued, and able to bring their whole selves to the work. I ground my practice in participatory approaches that center community expertise and shift power to those most directly impacted. I'm especially drawn to systems thinking and systems mapping as tools to surface patterns, hold complexity, and turn data into meaningful action. As an immigrant woman raised in Prague and the first in my family to graduate from college, I reflect often on how my identities – including my privileges – shape the way I show up in this work. I approach evaluation as a lifelong learner, committed to curiosity, humility, and repair. My goal is to build practices that reflect not only what we do, but how we choose to be in relationship with one another.

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