



GETTING CREATIVE

More than Just Job Training at the Steel Yard

MARGO KAROFF-HUNGER

Margo was born and raised in Providence, Rhode Island. She received her bachelor's degree in human geography from the University of Vermont and attained several welding certificates from the Advanced Welding Institute in South Burlington, Vermont. She has been with the Steel Yard since 2007 as a student, instructor, and now as the Workforce Coordinator; where she blends her passions for education, metalworking, and community development.



Figure 1 - A Weld to Worker practices his new skills on a public project commissioned by and for the community.

The problem seems simple enough: there are hundreds of metalworking jobs available in Rhode Island and not enough skilled workers to fill them. At the same time there are thousands of unemployed men and women who can not seem to find work. Why can those who are unemployed not acquire the technical skills for such positions and then fill them? Evidenced by the fact that this has been—and continues to be—a huge economic and social problem for the entire nation, the solution is far more complicated in practice than in theory. A diverse array of organizations, companies, and politicians have devoted expertise, time, and money to solve this problem in an equally diverse number of ways; yet, still, it persists.

Industrially-based companies find it harder and harder to replace employees who leave their positions. More specifically, in Rhode Island, the state Department of Labor and Training projects that between 2012 and 2022, thirty-four point five percent of welding, cutting, soldering, and brazing positions will be left unfilled. This percentage encompasses both growth in the industry and job openings due to attrition (i.e. retiring, changing careers) (2022 Occupational Outlook).

Additionally, demographic segments hardest hit by the recent economic downturn, such as young minority males and single mothers, consistently experience difficulty gaining access to career training, or even general education. As a result, available and lucrative careers are also rendered inaccessible. This, according to Robert Catalano, Professor of Public Health at the University of California at Berkeley, contributes directly to the “risk of having a generation [that is not] well-connected to the labor market and [that does not] feel strong ownership of community or society because they haven’t benefited from it.” In Providence, Rhode Island, the Steel Yard’s Weld to Work program strives to address this challenging dynamic by connecting at-risk demographic groups to the metalworking industry’s vast number of career opportunities through creative arts-based training.

The Steel Yard: A Dynamic Organization

The Steel Yard, an industrial arts non-profit located on the outskirts of one of the city’s poorest neighborhoods, is in the perfect position to create a unique job-training program, Weld to Work. Understanding the Steel Yard’s mission and history is important to understanding the significance of Weld to Work within Rhode Island’s socio-economic landscape, as well as within the national context.

The Steel Yard is located on a National Historic Register site along the Woonasquatucket River in the heart of Providence’s Industrial Valley. The three point eight acre property and 10,000 square foot industrial shop were purchased from the now defunct Providence Steel and Iron complex, a century old fabrication facility that built large scale structural and ornamental steel works. Although the property has been transformed from its original blue collar roots to now serve as a creative outlet for the

community in the arts; the facilities have maintained the industrial heritage of the site; including welding, blacksmithing, jewelry, ceramics, and iron casting. The Steel Yard offers programs and opportunities that include open enrollment courses, public art design and fabrication, artist residencies, youth summer camps, open studio programs, educational partnerships with custom curriculum, rentable work or event space, and workforce trainings. The site was purchased under the stipulation that its facilities would be used in a manner similar to original purposes, so each opportunity seamlessly and uniquely melds industrial work with art. The Steel Yard’s programs cater to working artists, students, community members, tradespeople, arts educators, and entrepreneurs.

The Steel Yard produces its own line of functional metal art through its Public Projects Department. Urban furniture, requested by clients, includes custom bike racks, tree guards, fences, trash cans, decorative dumpster enclosures, bus shelters, and other installations. The Public Projects Department also serves as a small-business incubator, hiring individual artists and fabricators to design, manufacture, and install these pieces, while providing the space, tools, and insurance necessary to do so. Examples of this functional public art can be seen throughout Southern New England.

Not only is the Steel Yard rich in industrial history and capacity, it is also a home to a diverse and talented community. While the physical site is constructed primarily with concrete and metal, the people that the Steel Yard engages with create a

vibrant and welcoming atmosphere. The openness and acceptance is almost tangible and is widely noted by visitors and “Yardies” alike. Those who have experienced the Yard describe it as a place “where all different walks of life come together to create...where everyone present feels comfortable and at home. It’s a recreation center for community and artists.” The psychological atmosphere keeps people coming back class after class, project after project, year after year.

A Brief History of Job Training at the Steel Yard

Participants in job training programs, or Weld to Workers, are just one of the groups that benefit from and contribute to the vitality of the Steel Yard’s community. The shop already had the infrastructure needed to create a successful program: tools, physical space, knowledgeable artists and fabricators to teach, and community connections to help enable graduates find work.

The first job-training program developed organically in response to the aforementioned skills gap. The Steel Yard received a large commission for several trashcans and needed more fabricators in order to complete the job on time. Five participants were hired to learn the skills needed to make the trashcans, a project lead by two experienced fabricators. Thus, Weld to Work was established as a project-based necessity and was almost entirely funded by the profits from the commissioned project itself.

Weld to Work Today

Now in its eighth year, Weld to Work still upholds the principles of paying participants to learn marketable skills while fabricating community artwork; but it also looks vastly different from the first iteration. Additional programmatic components have been incorporated in order

to help participants be more successful in the projects they complete during the program and simultaneously make them more employable after program completion. Each session, held about twice a year, has seen modifications as the Steel Yard has grown as an organization, and as it has learned more about the process of workforce training and the needs of the industry. The trainings maintain



Figure 2 - A Yardie stands next to the fence she and her team designed, fabricated, and installed through the public

curriculum components that have become near and dear to the hearts of both the participants and the organization, while adding some new elements. Since it’s inception, Weld to Work has graduated over 100 participants and will train 36 additional participants in the coming year.

The Application Process

Due to a limited number of tools and machines and the desire to maintain a safe and intimate environment, welding programs are limited to eight participants and two instructors. Weld to Work’s growing popularity requires the difficult task of whittling down a pool of twenty-five to

fifty applicants to eight. Requirements for applicants are simple: be over the age of eighteen and fall at or below federal poverty guidelines. By restricting the pool as little as possible, the program becomes accessible to those with the least opportunity. There is no “typical applicant,” but many have criminal records, have been in the foster care system, live transient lifestyles due to unstable home life, and/or receive federal aid. These challenges contribute to their desire to learn a new and useful skill. Applications are kept short and simple as to not intimidate those who find reading or writing difficult. The application is distributed with the help of a number of partner organizations working in different capacities with this targeted demographic. Once an application is received, a short phone interview is conducted. Participants are chosen based on matrix of considerations including the applicant’s future goals,

need, and their desire to take advantage of such an opportunity.

The Multiplicity of a Creative Curriculum

Participants begin by learning how to safely and competently use the tools and machines common to a metal fabrication shop. They then perfect these skills by designing and building Public Projects commissioned by companies, organizations, or the community. This component of Weld to Work creates something remarkable, which has been seen in each session: fabricating Public Projects generates an almost palpable electricity within the shop. Novice fabricators have the rare opportunity to work with a client and are paid a stipend for their work. Participants, who typically have rarely experienced being held to high and positive expectations, more



Figure 3 - Weld to Work participants pose next to bike racks that they designed and fabricated during their program. Weld to Workers build one-of-a-kind bike racks which are then sold and installed throughout Rhode Island. The proceeds are then put back into the program to help future programs.

often than not surpass those expectations in terms of both professional demeanor and quality of work. The exhilaration of being able to learn employable skills, give back to their community, and work as a team while having the responsibility to fabricate something that many people will see and use everyday lights a fire within Weld to Work participants. As one participant stated upon reflecting on his experience with Weld to Work, “This program changed my life.”

It’s not all about welding, though. The National Association of Colleges and Employers conducted a survey recently to identify skills that hiring managers plan to prioritize. The top three abilities that emerged were working as part of a team, problem solving, and effective communication (Forbes).

Years of experience and experimentation has taught the Steel Yard that the Weld-to-Work program’s technical training must be complemented by the development of “soft” skills like creativity, teamwork, and problem solving. Making functional artwork teaches participants to take their ideas seriously, to see that ideas can come to fruition with hard work, to persevere, and to creatively problem solve. These by-products of the Steel Yard’s technical training directly correlate to the skills identified by the National Association of Colleges and Employers’ survey mentioned above. Creativity is often the link that most industrial training facilities and organizations overlook. It is difficult to understand the importance of such a component in a technically—focused environment until one sees in it action. Upon completing his first individual project, one Weld to Worker noted that he “was impressed by how [his] bike rack came out.” Seeing a project through from the beginning to the end is a crucial self-esteem builder.

Additionally, learning the importance of communication throughout the fabrication process, in working with a team or with one’s supervisor, is also a vital skill taught in Weld to Work. This type of positive environment is atypical for participants who may not have finished high school, or who went to a low-income/low resource educational system that doesn’t emphasize art. The soft skills that participants gain from having a creative outlet each day are vital to the success of Weld to Work and subsequently, its graduates.

Tours to local industrial and educational facilities are also part of the curriculum, ranging from small art welding studios to large-scale fabrication shops and allied industrial businesses. These tours introduce participants to the wide range of employment and educational options. Weld to Work has been described as an exploratory career-training program. Not everyone who participates in Weld to Work wants to weld for the rest of their lives; why should the Steel Yard expect differently? The vast majority of participants who walk through the door have never tried welding before, and many don’t even know what it means, not to mention what a welder’s daily life might be like. Exposure to a wide-range of industrial facilities helps ensure that the participants will be introduced to at least one venue that sparks their interest and inspires them to consider the industry for their futures. Some tour sites are potential employers that participants could connect with after completing the program. Although Weld to Workers graduate with a solid set of welding and fabrication skills, these are not enough to enter the workforce at Electric Boat, for example, which is Rhode Island’s largest employer that designs and builds nuclear submarines for the United States Navy. It is because of this that other tours are to institutions that participants may obtain further welding education in order to gain such highly skilled positions.

A new addition to the Weld to Work curriculum was a soft-skills module formed through a partnership between the Steel Yard and the Genesis Center, located just a few miles away. The Genesis Center was founded thirty years ago to help in the transition process for new immigrants from Southeast Asia. Today, their mission has grown “to provide the highest quality education, job training, and support services to people of diverse cultures so that they may achieve economic independence and participate fully in society,” (GenCenter.org). In 2015, the Genesis Center helped the Steel Yard integrate an intensive and formal soft-skills training into the Weld to Work program. The most intensive soft skills component of Weld to Work to date, this training provided skills applicable to participants interested in finding and retaining a position in any type of career. The twenty-four hour course covered resume and cover letter writing, interview skills, employee rights, professionalism, and basic math as it pertains to a metal shop. Reviews from both participants and Genesis Center instructors of this pilot program were overwhelmingly positive.

Funding the Program

With a growing curriculum comes a growing budget. The cost of Weld to Work has exceeded the proceeds made from the sale of public projects. Currently, the program is privately funded through a combination of grants, private funders, and in-kind donations from individuals, organizations, and businesses. The proceeds from the sales of the Public Projects contracts also contribute to the overall budget. Historically, fundraising has been done on a session-by-session basis, and is a large reason why Weld to Work has run on a variable basis and changes year to year. The cost of the program includes paying an instructor and teaching assistant livable wages, overhead studio

costs, materials costs, lunches for participants, tours and van rentals, payment for outside contracted services, stipends for participants, and wages for all staff involved in the program.

Results

It has only been within the last year that the Steel Yard has been able to make a significant investment and commitment to grow their job training program. March of 2015 marked the first hiring of a Workforce Coordinator dedicated to overseeing this program. With this new and targeted focus, the Steel Yard has begun the difficult task of tracking participants after graduation. Due to unstable lifestyles and circumstances, participants often change addresses and phone numbers, rendering tracking difficult. However, one month after the Fall 2015 program, two participants were reported to have gotten welding-based jobs, one additional graduate got a second job, and another received a promotion at his current job. All credited the Weld to Work program, and its curriculum of both technical and soft skills, as having helped them advance their careers.

The Steel Yard is also making significant strides in establishing more direct routes to employment for its graduates. As partnerships with local businesses develop and strengthen, we believe that tracking participants will become easier and employment directly following the program will rise.

Additionally, the Steel Yard is committed to hiring Weld to Workers to work on Public Projects or to contribute to the educational programs by being teaching assistants whenever possible. This contracted work has been successful in several

instances, allowing for Weld to Work graduates to further develop their skills, gain more shop experience, and improve their financial situations.

Looking to the Future

The Steel Yard anticipates that Weld to Work will continue to evolve from session to session as it strives to keep this program in line with the philosophies and mission of the Steel Yard, while continuing to address the ever-changing needs of both the participants and the local industrial economy. The weeks and months following each program serve as a diagnostic period in which the successes and issues of the program are assessed. Following this reflective phase, changes are made while the next session is planned. The Steel Yard consistently evaluates the program based on: quality of participants, the technical and soft skills that employers are looking for, the success of public projects completed during the course, the tour schedule, program length, the performance of program instructors, and the strategies used to track participants after program completion.

In addition to constantly seeking to improve Weld to Work, the Steel Yard is also looking to expand its workforce training opportunities to the jewelry industry, which has historic roots in Providence. According to the Providence Journal, “By 1890, there were more than 200 firms with almost 7,000 [jewelry] workers in Providence. A demand for inexpensive jewelry and a growing immigrant labor force fueled that growth for another 100 years [...] By the 1960s, trade magazines were calling Providence ‘the jewelry capital of the world,’ (Providence Journal). It is a common assumption that while the jewelry industry in Rhode Island used to flourish, it is now a declining field. This is simply not the case. Similar to the metalworking industry, skilled

jeweler positions are plentiful in the Providence area, yet are hard to fill with trained workers. “There’s a commonly held misconception in Rhode Island that the jewelry industry is washed up, kaput, a victim of the ravaged manufacturing sector. But according to the Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation, we have the highest concentration of jobs in the jewelry industry in the United States,” (rinpr).

The plan for expansion is to create a jewelry skills training program with an emphasis on creativity, teamwork, community-mindedness, hard work, and self-esteem development through the creation of wearable artwork. The Steel Yard is currently in the reconnaissance stage of the process, looking at how such a program would dovetail into the landscape of Rhode Island’s jewelry industry.

The Steel Yard is growing and expanding, especially in its innovative workforce training program Weld to Work. Looking ahead, the organization, and its large community of supporters, plan to continue contributing to the revitalization of Rhode Island’s economy by helping underserved individuals build their productive and creative capacities. Furthermore, this workforce training project has the potential to contribute to broader economic development strategies that can strengthen the state’s economic underpinnings. The Steel Yard is excited to prove that creative job training truly works and will continue to expand the holistic curriculum and wrap-around services offered with the hopes that others will join the movement so that one day creative job training will be the norm.



Interested in learning more or supporting the Steel Yard? Visit our website at www.thesteelyard.org, calling 401-273-7101, or emailing workforce@thesteelyard.org



Figure 4 - Weld to Workers attend a tour of a local industrial business. Participants tour other welding schools, industrially-based businesses, and welding shops of various sizes and capacities. The goal is for participants to explore their interests, visualize what they could do after the program, and network with local employers.



Figure 5 - Participants learn collaboration, how to plan and implement the strategy for completing a large project, and how to work with and for clients on Public Projects such as this fence section.

Works Cited

2022 Occupational Outlook. Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training: Labor Market Information. Labor Market Information Unit accessed via website: www.dlt.ri.gov.

Jonic, F. (2013) “Made in Rhode Island: Jewellery Making, An Industry on the Move”, RINPR accessed via website: <http://rinpr.org/post/made-rhode-island-jewelry-making-industry-move>.

Adams, S. (2014) “The 10 Skills Employers Most Want in 2015 Graduates” Forbes accessed via website: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/susanadams/2014/11/12/the-10-skills-employers-most-want-in-2015-graduates/>.

Genesis Center Web Page (2016). Accessed via website: <http://www.gencenter.org/>.

Davis, P. (2015) “R.I.’s Jewellery Industry History in Search of a Permanent Home”, Providence Journal, accessed via website: <http://www.providencejournal.com/article/20150704/NEWS/150709845>