PolicyLink

America's Tomorrow: Equity Is the Superior Growth Model

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Features

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Coding for Equity: Connecting Young People of Color to Tech Careers

Courtesy of Black Girls CODE

Black Girls CODE workshop hosted at Google NY.

Playing video games and surfing the web — that's about all Rebecca Taylor could do with technology a year ago. Today, the ninth grader from Oakland, California, is writing code, building websites, and planning a career as a software developer.

She learned these skills and discovered her passion at Black Girls CODE (BGC), a San Francisco-based nonprofit dedicated to training and empowering girls of color to become leaders and innovators in computer science and technology. BGC is part of a new wave of ambitious, creative initiatives to prepare young people of color, from elementary school through college, for success in tech careers.

In Brief

Minimum Wages Rise

From Alaska to Arkansas, cities and states around the nation are raising minimum wages and boosting the economy while lifting millions of low-income workers out of poverty, particularly workers of color. In the last year alone, eight states have raised their minimum wages to anywhere from $8.25 to $11.50 an hour. Seattle, Washington, is poised to become the first major city to increase its minimum wage to $15, after a deal announced by the mayor last week. Find a campaign in your state.

A Transportation Bill for a Stronger Economy

Increase funding to connect low-income communities and communities of color to jobs, schools, and other daily needs. Build pipelines to new jobs for underrepresented workers. These are just a few of the equitable growth priorities within the Obama administration's $300 billion transportation proposal. Read our statement on the proposal and get involved with the Transportation

In the three years since its founding, BGC has served more than 3,000 girls ages seven through 17 and opened seven chapters around the country. Its goal is to reach one million girls by 2040.

Scaling such programs is urgent not only for communities of color but also for the tech industry and the nation's economy. "There are very real business drivers for tech inclusion," said Kimberly Bryant, BGC founder.

The new face of the new economy

That's because of the disconnect between the two major shifts shaping America's future: the growth of technology, and the changing face of the population. STEM — science, technology, engineering, and math — is expected to create 1.4 million jobs by 2020, with more than 70 percent involving computing. Job growth in computers and math jobs alone is projected to rise 18 percent over the next decade, compared with an overall job growth rate of 10.8 percent.

Meanwhile, African Americans and Latinos, who are among the nation's fastest-growing populations, are highly underrepresented in the STEM economy and career pipeline. While 18 percent of computer science degrees are awarded to black and Latino students, they make up less than 10 percent of the tech workforce. Combined, these groups make up almost 30 percent of the overall population today.

Companies report they are having trouble finding qualified candidates for tech openings — in a survey of information technology firms, 53 percent reported this as their greatest hiring challenge. Employers recognize that the next generation must be connected early and equitably to the technology pipeline if the United States is to remain the global leader in innovation and entrepreneurship. They are looking for ways to better recruit diverse candidates, said Kerry Kidwell-Slak, associate director for internships and employment at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, which graduates large numbers of STEM majors of color.

"We see it in employers who are coming to campus," she said. "They value diversity, they know they aren't the experts in being diverse, and they are willing to listen and learn."

Tapping talent and reaching goals

It's almost impossible to overstate the energy behind efforts on

Equity Caucus.

All on Board: Making Inclusive Growth Happen

Inequality undermines economic growth and well-being, and effective policy solutions must address not only gaps in income, but also better access to high-quality education, health care, and public infrastructure, according to a new report from the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD). "It is not enough to put in place policies that harness growth, we must also ensure that the benefits of growth are shared by everyone," said OECD Secretary-General Angel Gurría. Learn more about the OECD Initiative on Inclusive Growth.

the ground to connect young people of color with the tech world. Black Girls CODE works with hundreds of students like Rebecca Taylor, teaching basic programming skills through after-school classes, weekend workshops, and a summer bootcamp. The girls work in teams under the guidance of volunteer mentors and take field trips to area tech companies such as Facebook. The organization also offers Spanish-language workshops and classes for parents in financial literacy.

Like Rebecca, more than three-quarters of the girls who come are ardent web surfers and users of social media but never before tried programming.

Rebecca began in a nine-week class in video-game design, and loved it. "It was fun and challenging at times," she said. Since then, she has participated in BGC programs over the school breaks. She also has taken part in Bay Area "hackathons," which engage students of color over an intensive day or two to design apps aimed at solving problems in their communities. For instance, she served as a mentor at the first Startup Weekend-Black Male Achievement in Oakland in February. The event brought youth of color together with developers and leaders from tech companies to answer questions such this: Could a smart phone app have saved the life of Trayvon Martin?

Through events, ideas, and connections like this, Rebecca, who is home-schooled, has discovered a world of online resources to further develop her skills. She also has found the self-confidence to aim high and pursue her dreams. "I feel accomplished," she said. She hopes to go to a top university in computer science and become a video game developer. "She's realizing it's okay to be a girl geek," said her mother, Wilda Taylor.

Hands-on and high impact

Inspiring and educating kids like Rebecca is only part of the solution to the opportunity gap. In order for computer science students and graduates to have opportunities to get their foot in the door, they must be connected to the all-important internships that build résumés and professional networks and often lead to jobs.

That's where CODE2040 comes in. Through this program, the nonprofit places high-performing black and Latino software

engineering majors in paid summer internships at tech companies in Silicon Valley and San Francisco. Each cohort of "fellows"— this summer's will be the third — also takes part in a 10-week program of mentorship and leadership training, to cement relationships within the group and to encourage participants to "pay it forward" by guiding and supporting students coming up behind them. For instance, two members of the inaugural class in 2012 served as mentors last summer. And last summer's interns coached this year's applicants through the rigorous screening and testing process.

The idea behind CODE2040 is to develop all the strengths and assets that aren't taught in the classroom but that are critical to success in the world of Silicon Valley — collaboration, team leadership, and access to networks.

"The program is very high touch, very comprehensive," said Iris Gardner, CODE2040 manager of events and outreach. "Students get exposure to every possible piece of the tech economy, and they leave the summer with every possible skill."

Spots are highly competitive — last year the program received 400 applications for 18 positions. This summer's program will expand again.

And as the program has grown, its leaders have learned that they, too, must crack open their door wider. They recruited their first cohort from the nation's top 10 universities in computer science, such as Stanford and MIT. But African Americans and Latinos are underrepresented in these programs, so CODE2040 cast a wider net.

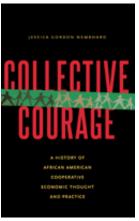Last year, the program actively recruited at 21 schools. Among them are the University of Maryland, Baltimore County; Georgia Tech; University of Texas-Pan American, and other schools graduating STEM majors of color.

"You have to think outside the box about where you're going to get your talent," Gardner said.

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Collective Courage: Jessica Gordon Nembhard on Black Economic Solidarity

Worker cooperatives and other cooperative enterprises can spur neighborhood revitalization and equitable, sustainable growth. That's because they create meaningful jobs and build community wealth while grooming local leaders and inspiring democratic participation. So argues scholar and activist Jessica Gordon Nembhard, whose new book, *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice,* reveals the rich, hidden history of African American cooperatives. The 30,000 co-ops in the United States today have helped create 2.1 million jobs and contributed more than $150 billion to our total income, according to a study from the University of Wisconsin. In an interview with *America's Tomorrow,* Gordon Nembhard explains how the lessons of the past can foster an even stronger, more inclusive cooperative movement.

Let's start with basics: what is a cooperative?

It's an enterprise, a business model, based on a set of values and principles that are grounded in economic democratic participation. It's about supplying and supporting economic activity based on need, not based on profit, and about building assets that will stay in the community, because it is owned by the community.

How can co-ops advance community revitalization and build a stronger economy?

Cooperatives address problems created by market failures, discrimination, and underdevelopment. They help people collectively to get the goods and services they need that they can't get anywhere else or that they can get only under inferior conditions. For example, many African Americans started credit unions because banks wouldn't serve them or charged unfairly high interest rates. Co-ops are a way for groups that have faced discrimination to gain some amount of economic stability, and from there you are in a much stronger position to gain political and civil rights. Fannie Lou Hammer said you can't have civil rights if you don't have economic independence, and that's still true today.

The biggest problem is that people don't know enough about this model. We're all brought up to operate as individuals and

to compete individually. But the problems we face are too big to solve individually. Cooperatives are a way for people to come together, to pool together what they do have to get something for their community, for themselves and their families. You get all these interlocking benefits, more dignity of work, more connection to the community, social and human capital development, in addition to a viable business that is stabilizing a community.

How far back can African American co-ops be traced?

I began my research by reading W.E.B Du Bois. He wrote a book in 1907, *Economic Cooperation among Negro Americans.* He starts reporting about enslaved people working together to save enough money to buy somebody out of slavery, or to do a community garden so that they all can get some extra vegetables and fresh food to eat. And the roots of collective action and pooling of resources go back even further. Every society, every group in the world through history has used some form of economic cooperation. To say it came only from a European tradition, which I sometimes hear, is unfair and untrue.

But what is true is that this work — actually doing alternative economics in black and other communities — was always very dangerous work, which is why I titled this book "Collective Courage." I've documented how there was physical violence and many times there was economic sabotage against these businesses. I often found instances of people getting killed, co-ops being burned down, commercial banks not lending or providing financial services to these businesses.

You describe hundreds of fascinating examples of African American cooperative activity through the centuries.

Right. I thought this book would take two years and I'd find maybe 10 examples. Fifteen years and hundreds of examples later, I'm still finding new information. I didn't expect that I would find such a rich history of African American cooperatives and cooperative activity, from slavery times to today. And I found that in each of these periods, there were black organizations that were deliberately promoting co-ops. So in the 1880s it was integrated unions, like the Knights of Labor, and black organizations like the Colored Farmers' National Alliance and Co-operative Union. In the 1930s and 40s it was the Young Negroes Cooperative League — which

had Ella Jo Baker as the executive director — and the Ladies Auxiliary to the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, led by Halena Wilson, with support from A. Philip Randolph. And then in the 1960s and 70s, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Black Panther Party started cooperatives; and the major civil rights organizations created the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, which is still around today promoting cooperative development in the South.

In each of these periods, having strong black organizations that were deliberately doing co-ops seems to have really made a difference. And today, we have a resurgence of cooperatives, especially worker cooperatives, among immigrant communities, young people, and people of color. And again, this is being led by strong organizations, like the U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives, which I helped to start 10 years ago. People also start cooperatives during bad economic times, such as during the Great Depression and during the Great Recession.

What surprised you the most in doing this research?

One of the biggest surprises for me was how many black leaders were actually talking about and creating co-ops, but that's not what they were famous for. W.E.B Du Bois, A. Philip Randolph, Marcus Garvey, Ella Jo Baker, and others all spoke or wrote about, and were involved in black cooperatives and democratic ownership. African American cooperatives grew side by side with the European American cooperative movement, and grew side by side with the long civil rights movement.

Ten years ago, I'd go to co-op gatherings and find very few black people in the room. Urban African Americans felt like the co-op movement had nothing to offer them and was not relevant to them. I still get people who tell me that blacks don't have this tradition, that this is not an indigenous model. Part of my work is to remind African Americans of our long and strong history of cooperative economic activity. And once they hear some of the examples I've researched, people start to realize that this is in their own family history, and start sending me stories of their aunts or grandparents who were involved in a co-op.

Tell us about a cooperative that's around today.

One of my favorite examples is about a 25-year-old co-op,

Cooperative Home Care Associates in the South Bronx. It was started by a nonprofit with the purpose of giving low-skilled women, mostly black and Latina women, much better jobs. There are over 1,000 worker-owners today, and they provide themselves with health care, good pay, a matched savings programs, and annual dividends. They really galvanized the home care industry throughout the city to get better wages for everybody and to provide better training and job-ladder support.

What's needed to advance cooperative development?

First is education. We really need more people to just understand the option, understand the model. We need to be teaching it to kids in middle school and high school. Second, we need more financing, especially if we want to do co-ops with low-income people. We need bridge loans, start-up funds, and grants; we have to educate and interest the funding community, whether it's foundations or municipalities or workforce development programs. Third, what we need is strong, uniform co-op laws. Some states have great co-op laws. Some states have none. For example, you can't license a worker co-op through Mississippi state law. We need to fix that.

What's next for you?

My book came out less than a month ago, but I have many more stories and materials that didn't fit in the first volume, and I am learning more every day. So I'm working on volume two.

To learn more about starting or supporting cooperatives in your community, go to the U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives , the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, and Grassroots Economic Organizing Newsletter.

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America's Tomorrow highlights campaigns, leaders, policies, reports, and local models that are advancing equity as an economic imperative. It is produced by Chris Schildt, Sarah Treuhaft, Fran Smith, and Ana Louie. To learn more, visit the *America's Tomorrow* webpage.

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