

THINKING OUT OF THE BOX

Reach for Tomorrow is all about using existing resources to motivate average students to excel... call it High School Relevancy 101.

—Peter Underwood, Founder of RFT

The program uses real-life experiences... so [students] understand the importance of high school mathematics and physics.

—Dr. George Rublein, Chairman, Department of Mathematics, College of William and Mary

Reach for Tomorrow, Inc., Targets the Nation's Youth

PETER UNDERWOOD

Reach for Tomorrow, Inc. (RFT), a non-profit organization established in 1993, is an example of how concerned citizens in a community, together with industry and government, can make a difference in the future of the nation's youth. For the founder and volunteers of RFT, the incentive for contributing to the program is based on the belief that at-risk youth need two primary motivators to set high educational goals: exposure to ideas outside their immediate environment and evidence that others like them can achieve success. The idea behind the program is that if these young people experience something they never thought they could do and are introduced to individuals from similar backgrounds who have broken out of the mold, they will start thinking "out of the box" of their previous experience and expectations.

Military academies and transportation facilities offer a unique environment for this exposure. Careers in the military mirror a broad spectrum of activities found in civilian life, and many involve transportation. Moreover, transportation is relevant and exciting to most youth, and it employs the latest in applied technology.

RFT combines the resources of the U.S. Department of Defense, industry, the various modal administrations of the U.S. Department of Transportation, and local school districts to create an innovative collaboration that enables inner-city high school freshmen to fly a plane, command a ship, and gain exposure to high-tech computers and hardware. For the past 5 years, RFT has provided an opportunity for more than 1,100 students to spend part of the summer participating in programs hosted by the

military service academies and the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy.

RFT targets high school freshmen who represent the largest pool of potential college students—those in the middle 50 percent of the bell curve. While at the academies, students live with cadet hosts, attend interactive laboratory sessions in science and engineering, fly planes and sail ships, and discover that college is an option and opportunity for them. The experience plants the seeds of interest in further education and future careers among students young enough to be open to the ideas and experiences they encounter. All program expenses are covered by sponsors and hosts, whose aim is not to promote the academies, but to instill in the students the values of high moral character, ethics, and excellence in all they do.

In this program, the messenger is as important as the message—highly motivated cadets from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, just a few years out of high school, communicating and establishing relationships with students from low-income inner-city environments. Whether or not these high school students eventually pursue an academy education is not the measure of success. The goal is for the participating students to return to their high school classes and share with classmates and teachers their summer experience, which involves working in academy classroom and laboratory facilities, receiving training in flight operations and ship handling, and establishing relationships with cadets whose standards serve as a model. The students thus become messengers to their peers and encourage them to see college as a viable option.

The author is Chairman, Reach for Tomorrow, Inc., Fairfax, Virginia.

Jamal McCray and other high school freshmen learn about robotics at U.S. Merchant Marine Academy.



The success of the program is measured through student test results, improved grades, and feedback from parents and teachers. Among the tools used to evaluate the effectiveness of RFT are an American College Testing (ACT) product entitled the Student Attitude Measure; a Department of Defense survey designed to measure attitudes toward service to country; and postcards sent to family and RFT hosts to request feedback on student performance. ACT recently issued a statement about how an RFT experience produces a measurable change in student attitudes toward education. In some cases there have been double-digit increases in the five areas measured by the ACT Student Attitude Measure.

In the future, RFT hopes to expand its long-term mentoring activities in an effort to maintain these initial positive results throughout the students' high school years. One proposed long-term solution to this need is "telementoring," whereby adult mentors establish and maintain an on-line relationship with individual students for at least five semesters of high school. Hardware for this purpose is being made available at no cost from federal and corporate supporters who want to help ensure that students enter the 21st-century workplace with the skills needed to compete.

RFT has convinced a variety of partners to work together to provide this unique opportunity for students entering high school. In 1998 corporate rivals Bell Atlantic and MCI supported the participation of nearly 320 youth from Chicago and Washington, D.C., in the program. TRW, American Airlines, United Airlines, Comdisco, Airbus Industries, Navistar, and USAA joined the communication giants through in-kind assets and grants. Students from Chicago attended week-long pro-

grams at the U.S. Naval Academy and the U.S. Air Force Academy. Students from Washington, D.C., spent a week in San Diego and at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy. The transportation for students participating in the program was supplied by American Airlines; active-duty Air Force C-5, C-130, and C-17 aircraft; and United Airlines. Shell Oil contributed the aircraft fuel, Dobbs International supplied in-flight meals, Ogden Allied provided ground-handling services, and airport authorities waived landing fees. Snacks, drinks, and even suntan lotion were contributed by CVS, Inc.

The San Diego program was an innovative venture among various units of the military and U.S. DOT: a Reserve Army Colonel mentored a team of students; Air National Guard video crews came from McGee-Tyson Air Force Base; an Air Force photojournalist took still shots; and a staff of volunteer Navy and Marine officers and local San Diego United States Coast Guard units complemented the program. Students were housed at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot and the University of California at San Diego. Each day, students in the program were taken to various locales in the San Diego area: to Brown Field, where they flew planes with the Experimental Aircraft Association; to Miramar Naval Station, where they experienced the Dilbert Dunker and ejection seat training; to the harbor area, where they navigated ships with the Coast Guard and the Harbor Patrol and learned about the Port of San Diego's shipping and intermodal transportation activities; to San Ysidro, where they drove a railroad engine; aboard the USS *Kitty Hawk*, where they participated in a research project; and to North Island Naval Air Station, where they visited both fixed-wing and helicopter squadrons.

The program at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy in Kings Point, New York, provided an opportunity to pilot planes with the Experimental Aircraft Association, to visit the National Aviation Training Center at Dowling College, to pilot ships in New York Harbor, and to learn about teamwork from the bridge of a merchant vessel. The program at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland, offered students from Chicago the opportunity to sail ships on the Chesapeake Bay, including the training vessels used by all academy midshipmen; visit interactive science and engineering laboratories in chemistry, physics, and computer science; fly aircraft at the Navy Flying Club; and compete in academy leadership training courses. At the U.S. Air Force Academy, students visited interactive laboratories in chemistry, behavioral

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