

Six Skills for Success

How the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program Can Support Participants in Developing Portable Skills That Employers Value

Every year, National Guard Youth Challenge Program (ChalleNGe) cadets embark on an exciting but complicated journey: life after the program. Some cadets leave ChalleNGe with a high school diploma, others with a high school equivalency credential, and still others with substantial high school credits. All, however, leave with some insight into the working world, having had opportunities to explore career possibilities and develop work-related skills during the program.

Since the 1990s, ChalleNGe has provided young people who are not making progress in traditional high school a chance to improve their lives. Participants (cadets) focus on academic excellence, as well as physical fitness, responsible citizenship, leadership, and life-coping skills. Building skills to help cadets secure long-term, gainful employment is another of the program's goals. Understanding the skills that today's employers are looking for is an important step to ensure the program's success in helping cadets thrive in the world.

To assist ChalleNGe administrators and site directors in preparing cadets for meaningful employment, RAND Corporation researchers examined labor market information and data to determine a set of *portable skills*—skills that employers value and that workers can apply in many jobs. These skills were drawn from an analysis of promising *middle-skills jobs*—that is, well-paying jobs that require a high school diploma and sometimes additional education or training short of a bachelor's degree. Having such skills can help cadets enter the

complex, evolving labor market or, should they wish, continue their education. Many of these skills are already featured in the ChalleNGe program, and they can be further integrated and emphasized to maximize the potential benefits for cadets.

Why Should the ChalleNGe Program Focus on Portable Skills and Not Simply Occupations?

At first, it might seem more practical to prepare cadets for specific promising occupations than to focus on growing the portable skills that employers value. ChalleNGe staff and administrators could utilize appropriate curricula and forge partnerships with local schools, employers, or trade associations to facilitate employment, apprenticeships, and job-based learning. And many sites do offer some training of this type. But the development of occupation-specific training programs carries risks, as outlined here.

Training programs can be expensive. Setting up a new occupational training class, outfitting a separate classroom, and hiring additional instructors may be beyond many ChalleNGe administrators' budgets.

What is considered a "good" occupation in one part of a state may be a nonexistent job in another part. Cadets from urban, suburban, and rural communities learn and live together at one site but generally return to diverse communities across an entire state.

Not all cadets would be able to immediately benefit. Many cadets work toward a high school diploma or its equivalent while at ChalleNGe but require additional post-ChalleNGe schooling to earn their credentials. These credentials are typically required before beginning a more advanced industry training in such occupational fields as construction, health care, and food service.

The focus on specific skills that are needed to succeed in a wide range of promising middle-skills jobs should allow ChalleNGe programs to leverage low-cost activities to generate positive opportunities for cadets. These skills complement a wide variety of occupational paths and are likely to serve cadets in their careers for a long time, which is appropriate for young adults just entering the labor market.

How This Study Was Conducted

The RAND team followed five steps to identify employer-valued skills that ChalleNGe staff already teach or can readily integrate into their program. Figure 1 illustrates those steps in brief.

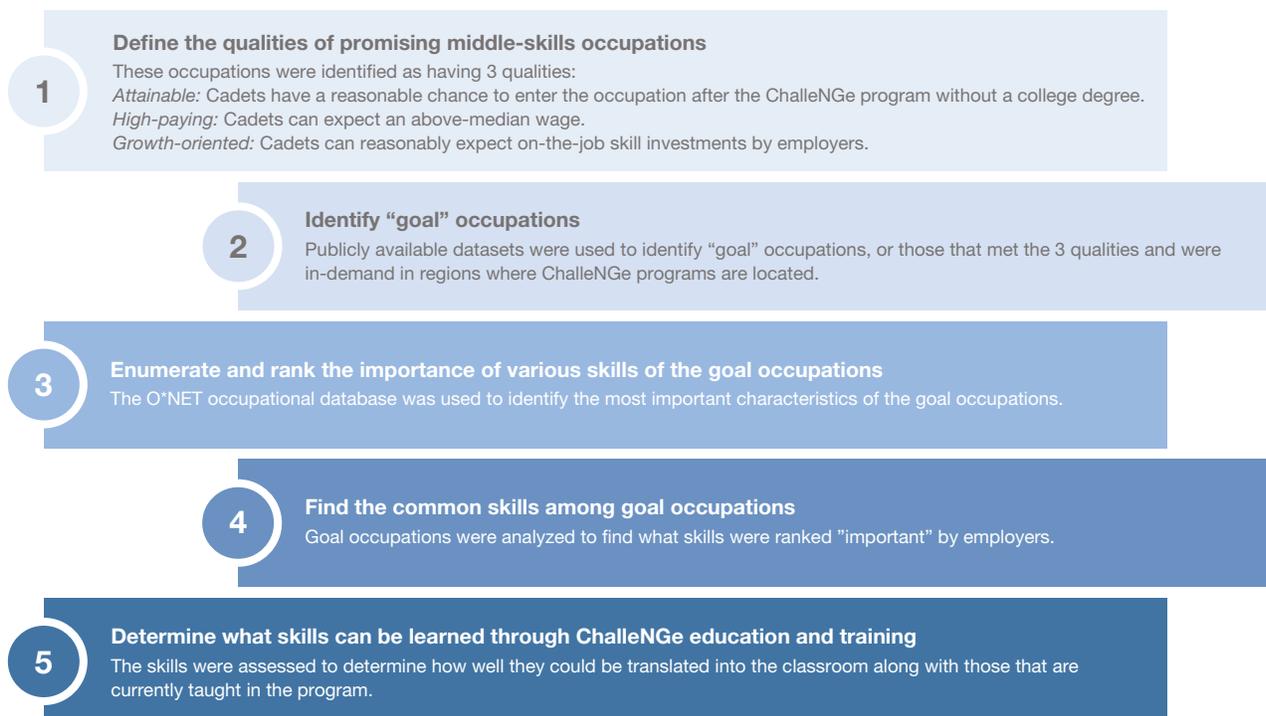
Results: Six Portable Skills in Which ChalleNGe Can Invest

Highlighted on the following pages are the six skills most prominent in the attainable, growth-oriented, high-paying occupations identified by the research team. Notably, ChalleNGe already focuses on many of these skills in its current programming. In many cases, integrating skills into current programming may mean simply including “real-life” simulations of instances where such skills would be necessary.

Turning Skills into Occupations

While these six skills do not have a commonly recognized credential, this research suggests that they are important across many different middle-skills occupations. Middle-skills occupations can be well paid, and many are accessible to cadets who have a high school diploma or its equivalent. Moreover, these jobs are in demand in today’s economy. Fostering these skills in cadets will help them prepare to enter the workforce and help the program accomplish its goal of ensuring that cadets have the skills needed to secure long-term, gainful employment.

FIGURE 1
Five-Step Study Plan to Identify Employer-Valued Skills for the ChalleNGe Program



Portable Skills

- **Spoken and Written Communication.** Many goal occupations value the ability of workers to express themselves clearly and effectively, and to understand what they have heard or read. These jobs frequently require face-to-face discussions, telephone communication, and other forms of communication, such as writing letters of recommendation for subordinates or interviewing job applicants.

ChalleNGe Integration. Simulations of real-world communication activities can be incorporated into ChalleNGe classrooms, as well as into nonacademic activities that give cadets practice in articulating and/or writing clearly.

- **Teamwork and Team Communication.** From the construction site to the hospital room, many of the goal occupations draw from fields in which teamwork and communication are critical. Daily work activities in many occupations include working on a team and being in direct contact with others and include communicating with supervisors, subordinates, and peers. One key skill is active listening. This involves giving full attention to what other people are saying, processing what they say, and not interrupting.

ChalleNGe Integration. In many ways, teamwork and team communication are already built into the ChalleNGe program. Cadets build group cooperation and dependability in their platoons. Moreover, the program includes an explicit emphasis on leadership and followership. ChalleNGe staff might consider emphasizing activities in which cadets are given opportunities to work or solve problems and communicate in small groups. These activities can be integrated in and outside of classroom activities.

- **Logic and Reasoning.** Basic logic, reasoning, and problem solving are important to the performance of many goal occupations, as are critical thinking, complex problem solving, and inductive and deductive reasoning. Work-based examples of these skills include using evidence to determine the prime suspect of a crime or redesigning a floor layout of a workshop or plant to take advantage of new techniques.

ChalleNGe Integration. There are many ways to incorporate logic games and puzzles into a cadet's repertoire while in the ChalleNGe program.

- **Information Expertise.** Capturing, ordering, processing, and remembering information are key to many goal occupations for cadets. Active learning—understanding the implications of new information—is important in many of today's workplaces. Information ordering—putting things or actions in a proper pattern or rule—is also valued by employers. Examples of information expertise on the job include putting items in numerical order, assembling equipment based on instructions, following a blueprint, and making a budget. Work-related activities also include gathering, documenting, and recording information.

ChalleNGe Integration. Many elements of ChalleNGe's academic focus are already an investment in information expertise. Additional games or activities to encourage memory-building or pattern-recognition could be added.

- **Decisionmaking.** Using information, facts, and data to make decisions is important to many of the goal occupations. This can involve evaluating information to make a decision, make a judgment, solve a problem, or weigh the costs and benefits of potential approaches in selecting a course of action. Decisionmaking activities in goal occupations include establishing a cafeteria menu, selecting the location of a store, determining how a break will affect worker productivity, or evaluating a loan application for risk. While advice and experience are typically the biggest aids for making life decisions, professional decisionmaking requires knowing how to weigh different forms of information against potential actions.

ChalleNGe Integration. Judgment and decisionmaking can be incorporated into ChalleNGe through role playing, games, stories, and book discussions, among other instructional and traditional academic coursework activities.

- **Computer Familiarity.** Technology is prevalent in the modern workplace. Administrative assistants, health care workers, construction and building inspectors, and many other workers depend on computers or tablets to do their jobs. When entering the workforce, cadets should be familiar with professional communication skills and how to apply them in the appropriate setting, such as how to follow up after a job interview or how to email a supervisor.

ChalleNGe Integration. This is likely the most challenging skill to integrate in the current ChalleNGe program. The decision to incorporate technology into cadets' education can be a function of budget and resources. Cadets' use of computers, particularly the internet, is often a concern of program staff: Many sites choose to minimize technology use because staff feel that cadets will not use it in accordance with the rules or that firewalls or website blocks can be worked around. Even given these concerns, cadets still need to be fluent with technology for many jobs, and some cadets may not receive exposure to computers or opportunities to practice technological skills at home. ChalleNGe sites may consider using computers to emphasize other investments, such as communication (e.g., writing emails, resumes) or logic and problem solving (e.g., educational games).

This brief describes research conducted in RAND's National Security Research Division and documented in *What Are the Skills Required to Obtain a Good Job? An Analysis of Labor Markets, Occupational Features, and Skill Training for the Youth ChalleNGe Program*, by Kathryn A. Edwards, Melanie A. Zaber, and Daniel Schwam, RR-A271-3, 2022 (available at www.rand.org/t/RR-A271-3). To view this brief online, visit www.rand.org/t/RBA271-1. The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

Limited Print and Electronic Distribution Rights: This document and trademark(s) contained herein are protected by law. This representation of RAND intellectual property is provided for noncommercial use only. Unauthorized posting of this publication online is prohibited; linking directly to this product page is encouraged. Permission is required from RAND to reproduce, or reuse in another form, any of its research documents for commercial purposes. For information on reprint and reuse permissions, please visit www.rand.org/pubs/permissions.

© 2022 RAND Corporation