



Helping Low-Income Urban Youth Make the Transition to Early Adulthood

A Retrospective Study of the YMCA Youth Institute

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Young adulthood, typically defined as between the ages of 18 and 25, is a critical period of growth during which young people acquire the education and training that serve as the basis for their later occupations and income (Arnett, 2000). The successful transition from adolescence to early adulthood requires youth to have the skills and resources to graduate high school and then go to college or enter the workforce (Fuligni & Hardway, 2004; Lippman, Atienza, Rivers, & Keith, 2008). To accomplish these tasks in advanced urban societies, young adults need a wide range of social, cognitive, psychological, and technological skills and supports: academic and critical thinking skills, a sense of purpose or a vision or plan for the future, social and interpersonal competence, knowledge of how to access college and financial resources, social support and capital including mentors who emphasize the need for college and workforce skills, civic engagement, and workforce and technology skills (Hamilton & Hamilton,

2009; Lippman et al., 2008; Warschauer & Matuchniak, 2010).

Low-income urban youth of color often face challenges in their transition to early adulthood. High school out-of-school time (OST) programs that promote positive youth development may help youth to better negotiate this period (Fuligni & Hardway, 2004). However, little research exists on the long-term impact of such programs on young adults. We conducted a pilot qualitative study to explore the perspectives of young adults on the effect of their participation in the YMCA of Greater Long Beach Youth Institute. Respondents indicated that the program positively influenced their life choices and their ability to pursue higher education and enter the workforce. Our findings suggest implications for other high school OST programs.

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Vulnerable Youth and the Transition to Adulthood

Both directly and indirectly, poverty can make the transition from adolescence to early adulthood difficult (Berzin, De Marco, Shaw, Unick, & Hogan, 2006). Low-income youth are at risk for low academic achievement and school dropout, often because of family, school, and community challenges associated with poverty (Lacour & Tissington, 2011; Reardon, 2011). Students from high-income families are five to seven times more likely to graduate from high school than those from low-income families (Chapman, Laird, Ifill, & KewalRamani, 2011; Snyder & Dillow, 2010). Low-income youth are also less likely to have college readiness knowledge and skills (Hooker & Brand, 2010; Rodrick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009) and are much less likely to attend college (Kim & Nunez, 2013). Once low-income youth enter an institution of higher education, they are less likely to graduate (Elliott, 2013; Muraskin, Lee, Wilner, & Swail, 2004). In 2009, 8 percent of youth from families in the lowest income quartile had graduated from college by the age of 24, compared to 82 percent of those in the highest quartile (Postsecondary Education Opportunity, 2010).

This continuing disparity between low-income and higher-income youth is problematic because, in the near future, about two-thirds of all U.S. jobs—including almost all jobs in the fastest-growing, highest-wage areas—will require some postsecondary education (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010). Strong technology skills are also highly valued in the workforce; unfortunately, low-income youth have lower levels of technology access and skill, both of which are critical for productive adult employment (London, Pastor, Servon, Rosner, & Wallace, 2010; Warschauer & Matuchniak, 2010). Although high school work opportunities may reduce dropout rates and smooth the transition into the adult workforce, low-income teens have fewer employment opportunities than their higher-income counterparts (Sum, Gillis, & Palma, 2012).

High School OST Programs

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low-income youth (Gardner, Roth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008). Such programs positively influence the healthy development of low-income youth by helping them to develop diverse skills and support networks (Barr, Birmingham, Fornal, Klein, & Piha, 2006). OST programs that promote education and instill a sense of belonging and competence may develop characteristics that help youth make the transition to young adulthood (Daud & Carruthers, 2008). Strong mentoring connections to positive adults can also contribute to positive outcomes for vulnerable youth (Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005). OST programs that promote positive youth development may be especially beneficial, since many aspects of positive youth development overlap with college and workforce readiness (Lippman et al., 2008). However, research on the long-term impact of positive youth development programs, particularly with adolescents transitioning to adulthood, is very limited (Barcelona & Quinn, 2011).

Effective high school OST programs are comprehensive, offer diverse program components, allow flexibility in how youth choose to be involved (American Youth Policy Forum, 2006) and integrate positive youth development principles (McKay, 2011). Components of effective OST programs include academic support and engagement in learning (Barr et al., 2006; Pittman, Irby, Yohalem, & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2004), technology integration and project-based learning (Donner & Wang, 2013), workforce skill development or paid internships (Halpern, 2006), service learning (Schneider-Muñoz & Politz, 2007), and diverse, relevant learning opportunities (Barr et al., 2006). Research also stresses the importance of hiring committed, accessible staff who are capable of forming strong relationships with teens and using these bonds to encourage youth to develop competencies (Jones & Deutsch, 2011; The After-School Corporation, 2007).

The YMCA Youth Institute

The YMCA of Greater Long Beach Youth Institute is a year-round OST program that uses technology to promote positive youth development and enhance the academic success and career readiness of low-income high school students of color. The goals of the Youth Institute (YI) are to:

- Improve the technology, career, leadership, and decision-making skills of youth to promote readiness for higher education or career entry after graduation
- Improve academic achievement and stimulate interest in higher education
- Promote bonding to pro-social adults and community attachment among low-income urban high school youth

The YI recruits youth by partnering with area schools and community organizations to distribute program information. Many youth learn about the program from YI alumni. Youth must submit an application to join the program. The selection process is structured so each cohort is diverse in gender and ethnicity. To ensure that vulnerable youth are served, selection is based in part on responses to an application question about adversity the applicant has faced. Almost all participating youth come from poverty. New cohorts begin each summer (Coe-Regan & O'Donnell, 2006). The number of entering youth varies by year, depending on funding, but typically is between 35 and 40 youth.

The program has two components: an intensive summer technology program and a year-round academic support program. On program entry, youth participate in an eight-week summer program, 35 hours per week. The first week is spent at a wilderness retreat. Participants are assigned to project teams, mixed by gender and ethnicity. Initiative games and a low-ropes course promote group cohesion and leadership skills such as problem solving and communication. Cultural awareness and tolerance activities are integrated throughout the week (O'Donnell & Coe-Regan, 2006).

During the rest of the summer, youth engage in projects to learn technology skills. The technology content is constantly evolving to include the latest software for animation, graphic design, web design, video editing, and music creation. All technology classes have a curriculum covering the pedagogical approach and the skill sets to be learned. Projects, which are completed in teams, include animated logos, movies, and a teen magazine. All projects are linked to school content standards and are designed to promote literacy, math, and higher-level thinking skills. Youth are paid a stipend for the summer program, which culminates in a film festival for family and community members (Coe-Regan & O'Donnell, 2006).

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Upon graduation from the summer program, youth become YI alumni and can voluntarily participate in year-round activities during high school and college. Involvement opportunities vary, but they typically include daily digital art labs and homework assistance, academic and personal advising, community service, equipment check-out, field trips, weekend leisure activities, community leadership positions, and social work support (Coe-Regan & O'Donnell, 2006). Staff members assist youth with high school course selection, take them on college field trips, and help them with college and financial aid forms. Alumni can also apply to receive stipends to be mentors for new YI cohorts or work as paid interns with Change Agent Productions, a multimedia social enterprise associated with the program (O'Donnell, Tan, & Kirkner, 2012). Opportunities after high school graduation include young adult retreats, holiday events, paid staff positions, or volunteer activities with the YI or the

YMCA. All YI staff have extensive training and past experience with positive youth development practices; most have digital media or technology degrees. The program designers believe that the youth development skills are most important, because specialized technology skills are easier to teach.

In past evaluations, YI participation has been linked to improvements in leadership and technology skills (O'Donnell & Coe-Regan, 2006) and to significantly higher high school standardized test scores and grades, as well as somewhat fewer absences than matched comparison youth (O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2014).

Methods

Due to the exploratory nature of the study, we used focus groups to gain insight into participants' experiences with the program and their perceived long-term outcomes.

Data Collection and Sample

YI staff gave us contact information for alumni who were over the age of 18 and no longer in high school. Invitations to participate in focus groups were extended by telephone, e-mail, and Facebook. Of the 102 alumni for whom contact information was provided, 34 participated in one of seven focus groups. Thus, this analysis is based on a small convenience sample.

Participants signed consent forms, and the study was approved by our institutional review board. Because

we have long evaluated the program and have personal relationships with the program developer, we hired two outside master's level professionals to facilitate the focus groups. These researchers used a structured interview guide. All sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, with identification numbers substituted for participants' names so that we could not know their identities. Participants were given food and a \$10 gas card to thank them for their time.

Participants ranged in age from 18 to 25, with an average age of 22. Twenty-four (71 percent) were male. Latinos (56 percent) were the largest ethnic group, followed by Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders (29 percent), Whites (12 percent), and African Americans (3 percent). Compared to the whole group of YI alumni, this sample had a higher proportion of males, Latinos, and Asian-American/Pacific Islanders, so the findings might be more representative of these groups than of YI alumni as a whole.

Data Analysis

We analyzed the data inductively using a modified grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). First, we reviewed the data to identify preliminary categories and themes. Next, we separately coded each response line by line. We then met to resolve any coding differences and add new categories as needed to accurately represent the data.

Focus Group Responses

Following prompts from the structured interview guide, focus group respondents offered insights on their continued YI involvement as young adults, the benefits of YI involvement, the skills and lessons they learned, and the ways in which the YI prepared them for higher education or the workforce. They also offered suggestions for improvement.

Continued Program Involvement as Young Adults

Almost all participants (92 percent) were still involved with the YI; most noted multiple ways of staying involved. Working and volunteering for the YMCA were the most frequent types of involvement. Many partici-

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pants said they felt a sense of responsibility to remain involved. One said, "A lot of us took the quote, 'Much has been given to us and much is expected,' to heart. That's why we're still here giving back to the community and youth." Almost three-quarters of respondents had kept in contact with YI peers and staff or participated in the young adult program. One said:

If I am having troubles in my life and need someone to talk to, I can go to any of the staff. I mostly come to see old faces and catch up, but I've done multiple retreats and volunteer activities. You always stay connected and are pulled back.

A couple of the young adults still used YI technology resources, including computers and cameras, because access to these things is expensive.

Benefits of YI Participation

Many participants had difficulty answering the question about the benefits they had gained from the YI because they saw their lives and themselves as being completely different because of their involvement.

They gave me a job, a future, and hope. This program taught me how to be, psychologically and socially as a person. It helped me in my career and in the decision to go to college. If I wasn't here, I'd be pregnant or already have a kid. It totally changed my life.

Participants said that the most meaningful benefits of the YI were the community service and travel opportunities, which allowed them to see beyond their neighborhoods and to believe that they could make a difference.

I probably would not be involved with the community if I did not join this program. We had to volunteer for projects at a school. It shaped what I wanted to do for my career, how I wanted to help people. It definitely changed my view on how much I can shape the place and people where I live.

Participants also reported that the relationships they had established with peers and staff had positively influenced their lives. These relationships appeared to be critical, as many had not previously had strong, positive supports.

The biggest benefits are the people you meet. After ten years, I still come back because I enjoy and love

the people here. It's like a family. The support system is a fundamental part of my life. That support helps me move forward and be motivated about my goals.

Skills and Lessons Learned

When asked to identify the most important skills and lessons they had learned in the YI, participants frequently mentioned interpersonal and communication skills such as teamwork, public speaking, leadership, and comfort with diversity. They saw these skills as contributing to their later academic and workforce success.

One of the biggest skills was learning to work with different people; how to be confrontational in a healthy way, especially with difficult people; and how to communicate to find a consensus or to meet a goal. I definitely learned how to be in a leadership position or in any position working with people.

Participants also frequently indicated that technology access and the skills they gained from the program were valuable. Many, as youth—and some even now—could access technology only at the YI. For some, technology skills helped them perform better on high school or college assignments. For others, working with technology gave them skills and a passion for their future careers.

I took my YI background in animation software and creating models into an engineering class. I got a perfect score. The software was the same as I had been working with since I was 14. That made it easy.

Some participants said that the YI had helped them to tap their own creativity or to think in different ways. They often mentioned that the program's project-based learning was quite different from the way they typically learned in school.

In contrast to school, where you get lectured and turn in homework, [YI staff] give you one lecture, and then you get a project and learn by creating a product. There is a lot of room for creativity. That had a huge impact because I learned how to think when I was younger.

Some participants indicated that they had become more resilient and better able to adapt and persevere. One said, "We learned to adapt and overcome. We were thrown into situations outside our comfort zones. That's an important skill in school and life." Another made a similar point: "I'm not afraid to try different things and to make mistakes. The program taught me to not give up and do what I can to the best of my abilities."

Preparation for College and Work

Participants who had attended or were attending a college or technical school appreciated the tangible help the YI provided with college applications, financial aid forms, and recommendations, as well as high school assistance such as tutoring and guidance on class selection. First-generation college students, who often described themselves as "lost" in the college process, particularly valued this help.

It was because of the YI that I even went to school. They helped me with everything. They brought in people from the university and wrote letters of recommendation for my bachelor's and master's programs. They were instrumental to me going to college.

The day I got accepted into college, I called the people who were super-important to me. The YI staff and peers were more excited than my parents. I got more college support from the YI than from my family, who did not know about college.

Another contribution respondents frequently mentioned was that the program had encouraged them to consider higher education.

This program put me in college. The people I was close to didn't like doing homework, didn't like teachers, and got into trouble. But, in this program, there were a bunch of kids determined to win a scholarship and search for the college that was right for them. All the staff tells kids, "You should go to college because it gives you more opportunities in life." Having the staff check my grades in high school helped me know they had my back. I felt I had to represent them. These connections pushed me into going to college, something I am grateful for.

YI participation also helped some to decide on their career choices or college majors.

They changed what I wanted to do in my career. When I first came, I wanted to do something like construction. As soon as I touched a computer, I was in love with it: the problem solving, fixing, building, and anything that has to do with technology. When I entered college, I knew what classes I needed to take and the requirements.

Participants thought the technology skills they had developed in the YI were beneficial in both high school and college. The equipment they could access at the YI also helped some to perform better academically. One

said that, when asked to make a presentation, “The fact that I could make a movie impressed the teacher and got me an A.”

Almost one-third of respondents reported they had learned critical thinking or organizational skills in the YI that helped them to be successful in college. One participant summarized this view: “You are introduced, at an early age, to life skills like critical thinking, time management, and group problem-solving skills. These are skills you absolutely need. Those are the most important skill sets I took to college.”

Focus group participants who had not chosen to pursue higher education or who were working while in college or after college graduation described the workforce skills they had developed in the YI. One summed up the categories of workforce skills: “The relational skills, the media skills, the organizational skills that we learned—I use them every day in my work.” Respondents most frequently said they used technology skills in the workplace, regardless of whether their jobs were technology-related. A few also reported that the YI taught them to be organized, self-directed, and hard working. For example, one respondent commented, “One thing that was drilled into me was being thorough, methodical, and meticulous.” Another said, “The YI taught me how to be self-directive: getting and taking care of an assignment, and then helping others accomplish their goals.” Some respondents also indicated the program had given them opportunities to network with professionals in their fields—opportunities that sometimes even led to employment.

Program Components

When asked to name the most important components of the YI, one participant echoed a common sentiment: “I don’t know if I could single out any one key factor. They all are very important and vital.” Participants most often cited the wilderness retreat as valuable because it helped youth to bond with one another and staff members, build team and communication skills, gain exposure outside their neighborhoods, and understand other cultures.

The wilderness retreat was the most impactful. It takes you out of the norm and exposes you to new things. You connect to people on a personal level, bonding you to staff and peers. We got to know each other per-

sonally: our strengths, our weaknesses, and what we shared in common. What we experienced together on that week makes you want to keep coming back. That is a part of what makes this program so successful.

Many participants thought the staff was the most important aspect of the program. Staff members established supportive relationships with participants—relationships

that often extended into their young adult years. In particular, participants saw the positive environment the staff created, the role modeling they provided, the relationships they developed, and the youth development principles they implemented as critical. As one said, “You need to have staff members who really believe in working with youth and know what youth development is about. Without that, you have a program that doesn’t mean anything.” Another said:

It’s impactful for teenagers to go through this because they know there will be someone to pick them up when they fall. It offers a great support system with caring adult role models who really exemplify what it means to be a youth leader and a caring adult.

Some also noted the benefits of community involvement or travel opportunities. Both experiences helped them to further develop their leadership skills while exposing them to the larger world. One respondent had served as chair of the Long Beach District Youth Council: “Through that, I gained a strong sense of my leadership skills, and a commitment to service and advocacy.” Another said:

The traveling helped me because, before the program, I had never gone outside the city. It’s important to visit places to know there are bigger and better things outside these city walls. Those experiences helped me create my identity and find out who I was.

Many young adults appreciated that they could work at Change Agent Productions or be employed by the YI or YMCA. Although of course they saw the money as useful, they appreciated even more the opportunities to travel, network, and improve their job skills.

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find a good work environment to grow professionally. Here, you are put into a leadership position that challenges you to grow. They teach you how to work, to live, to be successful.

The technology focus was viewed as a valuable program asset as well. One said, “The YI prepares you for college, employment, or trade school. There are a lot of valuable technology aspects that you learn and technology jobs are growing in our economy. But, in any job, someone is always behind a computer.”

Suggestions for Improvement

Participants were extremely happy with the YI as it was currently structured. As one said, “The program is just great. I see it improving every year. They definitely assess what the needs are and evolve to meet the needs of the participants.” The most frequent suggestion was to expand the program to serve more youth or communities. These alumni were also very vocal about the need to have more trips and cultivate diversity to expose youth to a larger world. In response to the question about how to strengthen the program, one respondent said:

More trips, because you get exposed to life. Being low-income, underprivileged youth, we didn't get exposed to the things the Youth Institute exposed us to like snowboarding and snorkeling. It exposed us to life and forced us to bond with each other. We were exposed to other cultures, what makes us different and similar. That helps us in the real world when we work with other ethnicities. We learned, here, the world is not one race.

Additional suggestions for program enhancement included providing college scholarships, having tutoring more available, partnering with businesses to establish apprentice programs, and providing transportation.

Several respondents also suggested ways to improve the YI program for college-age alumni. The most common was to develop electronic mechanisms, such as email, Facebook, newsletters, or an alumni section on

the website, to keep all alumni apprised of opportunities and events. A few said that having more trips or other activities for college-age youth would be useful and provide needed ongoing support.

Implications for High School OST Programs

This pilot study explored young adults' perceptions of whether and how the YI prepared them for young adulthood. Participants reported the YI helped them develop social and interpersonal competence and technology skills, all of which have been found to be useful in the transition to higher education and the workforce (Lippman et al., 2008; Warschauer & Matuchinak,

2010). The program also appears to have helped these low-income urban youth to do better in high school and to increase their educational aspirations. It gave many the knowledge needed to apply to college and access financial aid. Respondents perceived the ongoing, positive relationships they established with staff and peers as integral to their lives, providing support, encouragement, and a network to call on when financial, educational, and personal challenges arose.

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The fact that so many continued to rely on these relationships, even as young adults, reinforces the notion that vulnerable youth may require additional social supports to successfully transition into young adulthood (Fuligni & Hardway, 2004; Hamilton & Hamilton, 2009).

Although our results strongly suggest that well-designed high school OST programs can help low-income urban youth develop the knowledge, skills, and supports needed to transition into higher education and the workforce, the fact that it used a small, non-representative convenience sample limits the ability to generalize the findings. It is possible that alumni who participated in the study were more involved in the YI

than those who did not respond to the invitation; thus, their outcomes may be different from the outcomes of youth whose participation was more limited. Researcher bias and social desirability may also have influenced the findings. Future studies should incorporate a larger, more representative sample or include a comparison or control group to better understand the impact of high school OST participation on the life trajectories of young adults.

Nevertheless, the feedback we got from YI alumni is consistent with studies suggesting that comprehensive high school OST programs can contribute to positive outcomes in young adulthood (Gambone, Klem, & Connell, 2002; Gambone, Yu, Lewis-Charp, Sipe, & Lacoé, 2006). Respondents identified multiple program aspects as beneficial. The high regard for the wilderness retreat suggests that this type of activity may be critical. It established the bonding necessary to keep older teens involved, while building their leadership, communication, and diversity skills. Participants also saw academic support, community service opportunities, trips, project-based learning, technology, and internships as important to developing skills for higher education and work. Participants also saw the use of a youth development framework as a vital program component.

The YI provided these young people with mentors who contributed to their vision of the future or their belief that they could accomplish things. These beliefs have also been linked to college and workforce readiness and are thought to ease the transition into early adulthood (Daud & Carruthers, 2008; Hamilton & Hamilton, 2009). Thus, our findings echo research suggesting that high school OST programs must hire highly qualified staff who can be strong role models and who can establish positive and trusting relationships with youth while still holding them to high expectations (Daud & Carruthers, 2008; Jones & Deutsch, 2011).

Many have suggested that civic engagement prepares youth for a successful transition to adulthood (Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement, 2010). Participants in our study supported this concept, frequently noting the importance of giving back to the community; community service helped some discover a career path. High school OST programs that require community service or create career pathways within their organizations can help young people develop important skills. Participants also suggested that high school programs need to expand horizons, helping youth from low-income neighborhoods to see beyond their boundaries: introducing the possibility of higher educa-

tion, identifying diverse career paths, and showing youth the long-term benefits of both. Internships that allow youth to better understand careers while helping them to develop workforce skills may be particularly useful. Trips may also help low-income urban youth envision more positive futures.

Many study participants noted that the technology skills and access they gained in the YI had helped them in college and were highly valuable in the workforce. Participants reported that their technology skills gave them an advantage in both settings. Integrating technology into high school programs may help engage youth and can provide access and skills that low-income youth often lack but need for the 21st century (London et al., 2010). In addition, the use of project-based learning, especially in programs with a technology focus, might help youth to develop important critical-thinking skills.

The YI is designed to serve high-school-age youth, yet many of these college-age alumni still considered themselves part of the program or in need of continuing support. High school OST programs might explore ways in which they can continue to connect with and support their graduates. This practice can help both the young adults and the youth-serving organization, as graduates may be a good source of volunteer labor or staff.

Our findings echo previous research suggesting that high-quality programs for diverse high school youth should be multi-faceted to meet the young people's diverse needs and desires (Strobel, Kirshner, O'Donoghue, & McLaughlin, 2008; The After-School Corporation, 2007). Other high school OST programs may want to implement some of the successful elements of the YI in their own efforts to help urban teens successfully transition to young adulthood.

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