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Youth Participatory Action Research on How Out-of-School Programs Can Support the Transition Out of High School: Moving Beyond "Getting Stuck"

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Abstract

The transition out of high school and into young adulthood is often fraught with challenge and uncertainty, especially for youth of color and first-generation students. This two-part research study first reports on interviews with young adults who describe the obstacles they faced in making this critical life transition. The second part of our study describes the findings from interviews with young adults who participated in Out-of-School (OST) programs during their transition to young adulthood. Through youth-engaged research, we identify six pillars or key elements that OST programs can offer to young people in building a sense of possibility and identity, as well as in providing important skills and resources that improve chances for success. Throughout, we argue that youth voices are a critical tool for understanding the efficacy of OST programs.

Keywords

Emerging adulthood, out-of-school programming, afterschool programming, youth participatory action research, youth development, transition to adulthood,

Introduction

Scholars, educators, and policymakers identify the transition from high school to young adulthood as both a critical and a sensitive phase of life (Coleman, 1974; Arnett, 2001). This paper contributes to an emerging knowledge base regarding what youth need in order to successfully meet the complex challenges of young

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adulthood. Our findings arise from a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) project that positioned high-school-aged youth and young adults from community-based organizations as researchers alongside college students and faculty. We chronicle here two coordinated and connected studies. The first describes a community-based research team considering how young adults in Springfield, MA experienced the transition from high school to young adulthood. Our second study directly evolved from what we learned from the first. In that study, we investigated how organized out-of-school-time (OST) programs can provide intentional, focused support at a critical juncture in young lives. This second exploratory study, built from the lengthy testimonials of our interview subjects, sought to identify specific elements that aided this transition, elements we call "pillars," an analytic framework to describe our findings inspired by the work of Drago-Severson (2009).

These elements summarize the direct experiences of the young adults we interviewed, and reflect the elements of organized OST programs that they found supportive in navigating the transition. The two studies together help us better understand both the nature of the problem and some possible solutions to it. Informed by the insights shared by young adults in the first study, we offer a new perspective in the second study on how these OST programs can effectively support this critical moment of transition.

Literature Review: Young Adult Success

Many researchers have documented that the transition to adulthood is a critical time of life (Arnett, 1994; Settersten & Ray, 2010). This life phase includes pivotal marker events such as continuing and finishing education, entering the labor force, and establishing independent households. Settersten has described it as a series of high-stakes junctures and pathways (Settersten, 2007). As adolescents prepare for and move into young adulthood, they face many decisions that are challenging yet consequential (Arnett, 2006; Furstenberg et al., 2005). Adverse choices have consequences that can be difficult to reverse, and yet, young adulthood is simultaneously a time of opportunity where positive "turning points" can alter a young person's pathway (Goyer et al., 2019; Zarrett & Eccles, 2006).

Policy initiatives seeking to prepare all students for a successful transition to young adulthood typically prioritize educational attainment (Nagaoka et al., 2015). For example, state and federal legislation emphasize narrow academic outcomes. The 2015 *Every Student Succeeds Act* emphasizes that "all students in America be taught to high academic standards that will prepare them to succeed in college and careers" (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). While scholars recognize the importance of education, they view the transition as a holistic passage. The influential concept paper *Foundations for Young Adult Success* holds that "while building an educated workforce is one of the core goals of our investments in young people, it is far from the only goal. Success also means that young people can fulfil

individual goals and have the agency and competencies to influence the world around them" (Nagaoka et al., 2015). This view conceives of the ingredients of success as including a diverse set of social-emotional and self-management capacities and behaviors as essential predictors of postsecondary and career success (ACT, 2015; Hora, 2019; Nagaoka et al., 2015; Yarnall, 2018).

While the passage to young adulthood is a complex experience for almost all young people, this time of life can be particularly challenging for populations who face economic hardship, racial marginalization, or who have attended under-resourced schools, for several reasons (Berzin & De Marco, 2010; Osgood et al., 2005). First, while imperfect, the design of K-12 education provides an established and predictable pathway. Once high school ends, however, this structured pathway is removed and the transition to adulthood becomes a "fragmented patchwork of often disconnected institutions: residential colleges and universities, community colleges, military and national service programs, work settings, and other environments" (Settersten, 2007, p. 253). Second, students from under-represented groups often lack the social capital needed to understand the world of postsecondary education and lack clear guidance on career pathways (Perna & Titus, 2005). They are less likely to have role models who have attended institutions of higher education (IHEs), and they may have less collective college knowledge to tap into in their communities, including about two- versus four-year educational opportunities and how to navigate the financial packages that can unlock them (Roderick et al., 2008). Third, public school students often do not have sufficient school-based support as they navigate the high school transition to what is next. According to the American School Counselor Association, a single public school counselor in the United States has a caseload of 471 students (Pratt, 2013). The young adults we interviewed in this project were well aware of this inadequacy in their schools, and consistently acknowledged the impossibility of accessing enough support from their counselors given their large caseloads. The reality is that most young people attending under-resourced schools do not receive the systematic coaching and counseling necessary to clarify their post-high school plans, prepare applications for college or career programs, and navigate the financial aid process.

Young people today face a highly complex educational and professional landscape. College graduates have better employment outcomes and higher wages than workers without a degree (Gould et al., 2019; Chetty et al., 2017). Studies consistently show that a high school degree is insufficient for young people who hope to land a job that pays a family-sustaining wage in today's economy (Carnevale et al., 2011). Without some form of education beyond high school (two- or four-year college, an industry certificate, or apprenticeship program), most young adults will find themselves lost in the current labor market. While the promise of a good job compels many to consider college, as things stand, the prospect of staggering debt discourages students from low-income families from enrolling in

further education and contributes to the high attrition rates in higher education (Hooker & Brand, 2010). It is against this backdrop that we initiated our YPAR project.

Study 1: Getting Stuck

On a cluttered bulletin board in the Project Coach office, there is an 8x10 color photograph pinned to the wall commemorating the successful completion of a year-long OST project in 2012. Project Coach is a college-community partnership linking Smith College, a liberal arts women's college in Northampton, MA, with school and community partners in Springfield, MA. Since 2004, the partnership has operated a sports-based OST program to help at-risk students find focus and purpose, and stay in school to the point of graduation. The high school students in the photograph had received extensive training in the science and methods of sports coaching. Once trained, these teenagers coached third, fourth, and fifth graders in a program that introduced children to various sports while integrating a series of lessons emphasizing teamwork, growth mindset, and the importance of practice.

The 18 students in the photograph, all people of color, were juniors and seniors who attended public schools in Springfield, Massachusetts, once a thriving and prosperous industrial center of such proportion that one historian referred to the city and its surrounding region as analogous to the Silicon Valley of the Industrial Age (Forrant, 2005). Over the last fifty years, macroeconomic forces have taken a significant toll on Springfield's economy, as plants have closed and industries have relocated. Several news reports and white papers now describe the city as one of the most segregated and economically distressed cities in the Northeast (Frey et al., 2013; American Factfinder, 2019).

The teen participants in Project Coach had engaged in a range of experiences designed to help them become expert mentors and sport coaches to children. The program's theory of change was predicated on the idea that through coaching, youth would learn a constellation of personal, social and life skills that would transfer to other domains such as school, community, college, and career. At the time the photo was taken, all 18 of the young people in the photograph were graduating from Project Coach with high-level coaching skills. They were also finishing high school and expressed excitement about enrolling in college and initiating the next chapter in their journey. The adult staff that worked with them in the program at the time would have described these young people as engaged community leaders and thoughtful teammates, prepared to begin their next life chapter. But by 2018—six years later—only two of the 18 students had earned a bachelor's degree, and only one had earned an associate's degree. When asked what might explain what had happened in the years after high school, one of the young adults in the photo offered a response that captured both the promise and the

obstacles facing young people as they strive to navigate this crucial time of the life cycle:

> I was the first person in my family to graduate high school with a diploma, the first to go to college full-time. I remember walking across the stage at graduation and feeling so proud to be breaking the cycle. My first year of college was a breeze, but then I hit a barrier….Days before school started, I was notified that my financial aid forms were incorrect. Next came a bill I couldn't pay. I dropped out and began working at a factory packaging bottles from seven at night until seven in the morning. I needed the money to pay for car repairs. Eventually, I felt stuck.

As our organization's staff heard more stories about promising program participants "getting stuck," we began to ask questions about our underlying mission. Our OST program began in 2004 when Springfield's high school four-year graduation rate hovered at about 55% and many of the city's schools were described as "dropout factories" (DeForge, 2007). The program's essential and explicit goal was to provide an array of support to help teenagers graduate from high school. Since then, the Springfield Public Schools have dramatically improved graduation rates (MA DESE, 2020), and our program has consistently helped young people get to the point of finishing high school. As a program that is deeply invested in the individual young people with whom we work, we felt compelled to better understand the "getting stuck" phenomenon.

Methods: Youth Participatory Action Research

Our first step toward this end was to form a study group within our staff team to explore what was occurring for young people as they transitioned out of high school. The work of the study group led our research team to apply for and receive a unique grant from the Corporation for National Community Service (now AmeriCorps) focused on "engaging communities in conversations about their civic health using participatory research approaches to facilitate civic engagement and strengthen community capacity to address local issues" (CNCS 2018, p. 2). The guiding framework of the grant emphasized undertaking a scholarly research project utilizing participatory approaches that "focus on collaborative knowledge production and co-learning, social change, capacity building, and strengthening communities" (CNCS 2018, p. 3). The grant has extended over three years, and this paper reports on our two Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) connected studies. YPAR focuses on emphasizing the voice of youth and young adults and positioning them as the experts of their own developmental and educational experiences (Camarota & Fine, 2008; Bautista, Bertrand, Morrell, Scorza & Matthews, 2013). What distinguishes the methodology from conventional forms of

research is that it provides young people with a space to create and advance research agendas that help them understand the power of their voice in the move towards community change and facilitating civic engagement and educational reform (Bautista et al., 2013).

The guiding framework of our initiative roughly followed McIntyre's (2000) three principles of PAR projects: (1) the collective investigation of a problem, (2) the reliance on indigenous knowledge to understand that problem better, and (3) the desire to take individual and collective action to deal with the stated problem. These aims are achieved through collective investigation, education, and action throughout the research process. The ethic and vision underlying participatory approaches to research involve strengthening community capacity to identify, document, and, ultimately, enhance community capacity to address local issues.

We had six objectives for our research: (1) Create a diverse team to learn about the skills of research and the efficacy and purpose of PAR; (2) gather data about the transition from high school to young adulthood through interviews and community forums; (3) engage in an array of interactive workshops that deepened our understanding of the issues; (4) devise modes of sharing what we learned with key community members; (5) work together to test out and develop interventions or action projects that promote the success of young adults in the community; and (6) commit to an ongoing cycle of inquiry, analysis, and action that would enable the youth and adults in our research team to collectively address, question, theorize, and take action against social and institutional injustice, specifically in schools and local communities (Scorza, Bertrand, Bautista, Morrell, & Matthews, 2017). As a team of researchers drawn from various communities and hierarchies, our task was to create a process that positioned young people from Springfield as empowered, knowledgeable, and engaged in an inquiry process designed to explore a timely and essential problem and then work on affecting change (Ginwright, Cammarota & Noguera, 2005).

Assembling a YPAR Team

When we received the grant, we initiated our project by reaching out to a broad set of young adults who had participated in Project Coach (PC) during high school and inviting them to help us think about the overarching question of the transition to young adulthood in the larger Springfield community. As a research-based youth sports initiative, PC deploys an array of participatory practices. For example, our youth have created digital stories and conducted surveys, and our PC curriculum involves youth in a wide array of activities that include interviewing. PC coaches might develop a set of interview questions for a college basketball coach or a community leader and then conduct the interview and synthesize key takeaways. PC participants also learn to plan and mount community events focused on relevant issues, such as nutrition for children. PC's participatory and collaborative processes

emphasize a lattice of cross-age mentoring and coaching that dovetail with the primary goal of participatory research: the convening of community members to learn about a community phenomenon and then develop action and intervention projects. Furthermore, as with initiatives in PC, "there is an intentionality in the PAR process about co-creating collaborative spaces to examine and discuss individual, school, and community concerns, and also to foreground indigenous knowledge and tap into individual and community assets, gifts, and talents" (McIntyre, 2000, p. 128).

The project formally launched in October of 2018 with the convening of 12 young adults and four staff/faculty from Smith College in our local medical center's innovation space, located in a reclaimed office building. We met in a room designed as a "living lab" with movable trapezoid desks, high-intensity halogen lighting, and white board walls. The agenda was designed in collaboration with Luis,[1] an alum of Project Coach, and our Smith College-based research team.

We started the session by providing thinking and free-write time around a series of questions:

- Describe what you are currently doing now in your life/job/school and how you got there.
- What's meaningful in your life right now?
- What is coming next? What are you excited about? How do you plan on moving towards what is next?

We then invited everyone to listen to each story while also taking notes on the threads and patterns emerging from our collective narratives. Luis initiated the narrative circle by telling his own story. After graduating from high school, he described his pathway, enrolling in and then dropping out of community college, and finally finding a job working as a supervisor for a group home for children enrolled in a behavioral program. He described how he felt that work was meaningful, saying that he found satisfaction in supporting children who were struggling with intense challenges in their lives. He finished by sharing how he felt caught in a bind: he knew that he needed a college degree in order to advance professionally but he also needed to work full time. After Luis finished, we spent the next 75 minutes hearing narratives of young adults or retrospective narratives from our Smith College contingent. After the activity, we opened the floor and went "meta," culling observations, patterns and themes from the narratives.

The group identified a range of themes from this initial conversation that were central to the development of our interview protocol. The themes included: a sense

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[1] Name changed.

that high school did not adequately prepare young people for the next phase of life; the constant press and stress of being financially precarious; and a strong acknowledgement that while young adulthood felt pivotal, many of the stories clearly illuminated uncertainty about how to navigate the time and access necessary support. As one young man said, “My dream is and has been to be an attorney. I believe that I can be an excellent attorney, but I don’t know how to begin.” He then told us the story of starting but then dropping out of community college, and being employed at the local hospital as an in-patient support ambassador:

> All the skills that I use to help patients solve problems can make me successful as an attorney, but I need to get my associate’s degree part-time and then finish my BA and then go to law school. When I imagine it out, I have no idea how much it would cost, how I could afford it, and how do I find time to do school while working full time?

This conversation initiated what would become an evolving community-based research team composed of young adults from Springfield (and eventually current high school students), along with faculty, staff and students from Smith College.

Collecting & Analyzing Data on Young Adult Experience in Springfield

Our focus in the first study was to understand the experiences of young adults in Springfield as they transitioned out of high school and into young adulthood. We believed that by inviting young people to tell their stories, we would hear many profound, relevant, and significant perspectives. Since we wanted to listen to young adults’ accounts, we selected interviewing as our primary method. We relied heavily on Glesne and Peshkin’s (1992) framework to guide how we conceptualized our methods and developed workshops to build our team’s capacity to conduct qualitative research. To develop interview processes that achieved Glesne and Peshkin’s (1992) outcome of “getting words to fly,” we created a four-workshop series between January and April 2019 for our research team. The first workshop focused on understanding the phase of life called “young adulthood” or “emerging adulthood.” The second workshop introduced the art and science of interviewing and engaged in the process of generating a draft interview protocol that reflected the community researchers’ perspectives on how best to articulate core research questions, in order to render them more “user friendly.” The third workshop involved refining the interview protocol, learning about the craft of questioning, and practicing how to use the interview protocol. The last workshop involved our team interviewing each other as a rehearsal.

Over the course of the first study, our team interviewed 30 young adults who attended high school in Springfield, MA. Interview subjects included young adults who were in college or had already graduated from college, were in the workforce,

or were unemployed. We interviewed a total of 30 young adults in the first study, of whom 28 were between the ages of 18-25 and two were age 26. 67% of the interview subjects were female, and 33% were male. 67% identified as Latinx, 13% as Black, 10% as White, 7% as Biracial and 7% unknown. We used a semi-structured interview protocol and conducted the interviews in pairs composed of a community researcher and a college researcher. We received Smith College Institutional Review Board approval for the research and all participants provided written informed consent. In an effort to foster ongoing learning and reflection, we adopted a variety of analytical processes including writing field-notes and engaging in post-interview discussions to process and reflect on what we were hearing (Creswell, 2007). For our team, the discipline of memo writing and regular reflection sessions focused on making sense of emerging patterns and themes served to build what Chun Tie, Birks and Francis (2019) call the "storehouse of ideas generated and documented through interacting with data" (p. 4). Interviews were transcribed verbatim and participants were assigned pseudonyms. In keeping with our commitment to participatory processes, we developed an elaborate method for coding that involved ensuring that each transcript was read by a team of coders. We employed a "narrative analysis" lens to discover themes, patterns, and theories from our qualitative data including the transcripts and field notes (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). We made sense of the data through interpretive interactionism (Denzin, 2001), an approach to examining qualitative data that prioritizes understanding the lived experiences of people by analyzing their words while remaining sensitive to their contexts. Denzin's approach, which lifts up the importance of how individuals experience the meanings and consequences of events in their lives, dovetails with the participatory research process. Mohr (1997) writes that the primary aim of interpretive interactionism is to elicit "thick description" through the interview process and develop "thick inter-pretation" by seeking to retrieve the meaning and to "capture" the interpretations that participants have brought to their experience. According to Mohr (1997), if individual researchers have personal, historical relationships to the research subject, as in the case of our YPAR process, where our research team has first-hand situational knowledge, it significantly enhances the capacity for what Denzin (1997) calls thick interpretation. We also recognize that our "first-hand knowledge" and mode of identifying interviewees through a version of "snowball sampling" also presents us with limits to the generalizability of our findings (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981).

What We Learned

Our interviews with Springfield youth definitively showed that they graduated from high school excited to launch themselves in the world, but soon faced myriad obstacles to college completion or to finding meaningful work. Our data consistently identified themes emphasizing "getting stuck," "taking detours," and

"getting lost." Our interviewees particularly highlighted the struggle they experienced transitioning to college. The challenges identified are consistent with available data. According to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 69% of Springfield students plan to go to college. Yet, data shows that only 5.6% of 18 to 24-year-olds in Springfield have completed their BA degree (MA DESE, 2020; American Factfinder, 2019). We also heard young people talk about struggling financially, feeling unprepared for the academic press of college, uncertain and unclear about what to study and pursue in college, and not feeling a sense of belonging or connection to the college community.

After several months of interviewing and hosting a range of activities that emphasized analysis and reflection, our team experienced a collective moment of what the learning scientist David Perkins (2001) describes as a "cognitive snap," whereby an idea or reframing of ideas falls into place that has a sizable impact. Our research team experienced such a reframing of the data during one of our reflection sessions that shaped our work's subsequent analysis and focus.

We had just finished a session of interviewing and gathered to debrief. We discussed a range of recurring themes: the challenge of paying for college, the impacts of having a child while enrolled in college, the financial complexity of becoming a young adult, and graduation from high school as a marker of a significant moment in life. Then one of the college students on the team said, "Yes, it [the transition into young adulthood] is like a sink-or-swim moment." In response, one of our researchers, a young adult who has a leadership role in a Springfield-based community program, offered a penetrating observation that crystallized what we were learning:

> What I've noticed growing up in Springfield and having been through this is that once students leave high school they feel shell-shocked: all of their support is gone, the real world doesn't provide the support that high schools do and this creates an extremely challenging transition for youth into adulthood. It's like "swimming at your own risk." After high school you don't have lifeguards, like teachers, social workers, foster parents for people who age out of these systems, after-school programs for kids.
>
> I think that's exactly what it is, it's swimming at their own risk and being thrown into the deep end. And we often hear the phrase "getting thrown into the deep end without a life jacket." Most of the young people in Springfield that are graduating, and perhaps this might be true for most youth in urban America, are thrown into the deep end without a life jacket, and it's like, swim if you can after graduating from high school. And the lifeguards are off duty.

The idea of programs serving as supports and the "metaphoric lifeguard" provided a guidepost that helped our team conceptualize what we were learning in our interviews. It also catalyzed the second study of our project, an exploration of how organized OST programs can support young people as they move towards and through the transition from high school to young adulthood.

Study 2: Young Adults Speak on the Value of OST Programs

Two metaphors, "getting stuck" and "swimming at your own risk with no lifeguards on duty" provided an organizing framework to our larger project and provoked a myriad of conversations. We asked ourselves, "What does it take to help a young person get unstuck—or even more critically—what systems would pre-empt a young person from getting stuck?" Similarly, we considered the question, "What types of support would help a young person feel as if they had the supports or 'lifeguards' as they navigated the choppy waters of young adulthood?" As we noted earlier, a number of the interviews we conducted described the role that organized OST programs played in preparing young people for the transition out of high school and then providing support during the young adult years.

In light of hearing a number of testimonials speaking to the power and promise of organized youth programs, our second study explored how young adults explain and describe the role of OST programs in supporting their transition out of high school. During this study, we interviewed 20 young adults between March and April 2021 who participated in OST programs during their junior and senior years of high school. We recruited our interview subjects through email outreach and social media, and by networking with administrators of youth programs who shared our invitation to participate with young adults. Of the 20 young adults we interviewed, 80% are currently attending college; 80% identified as female and 20% as male; and 80% identified as People of Color (50% as Black and 30% as Latinx), 15% as White, and 5% as Other. In total, 18 different programs were represented (two pairs of interviewees attended the same program).

The design of our interview questions sought to elicit stories and reflections from young adults about the specific activities they participated in at their OST programs and what effect the programs had on them as they moved toward and through the transition out of high school. Our stance as a research team was that program participants have what Cook-Sather (2002) calls "unique perspective" on what happens in programs as young people prepare for and undergo the transition into young adulthood. In addition to describing programs as third places, our interviewees identified six pillars that supported them in their transitions. Our analysis of the interviews with this sample of young adults yields an emerging framework that conceives of OST programs as "third places" (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982) in the lives of young people as they transition towards adulthood. "Third places" are spaces outside of the home or school where people gather to

connect with one another and access supports that help them to progress in life. In addition, we highlight six elements of OST programs that our interviewees identify as providing significant support. We call these elements pillars of support.

Review of the Literature: Organized Out-of-School Programs

A broad research literature documents how OST programs provide multi-faceted, positive benefits to children and communities (National Research Council, 2002; Pelcher & Rajan, 2016). We rely on Gardner, Roth, and Brooks-Gunn's (2009) definition of OST programs, which specifies that they: (a) operate on a regular basis during non-school hours throughout the academic year; (b) are supervised by adults; (c) offer more than one activity (e.g., homework help, recreation, arts); and (d) involve other youth. Durlak, Weissberg & Pachan's (2010) meta-analysis of research on the efficacy of OST programs found extensive evidence that a variety of program structures help participating youth learn personal and social skills, understand feelings and attitudes, and improve school performance. Fredericks and Simpkins (2013) conclude that OST activities are structured in a way that affords greater opportunities for peer relationships and developing friendships than traditional classroom contexts. Álvarez-Bueno et al.'s (2017) meta-analysis of studies that focused on physical activity in the after-school space concluded that participation improves classroom behaviors among youth. Research also provides evidence that youth who spend more time in after-school programs and receive higher doses of support and intervention—particularly during adolescence—may derive greater academic benefits than youth who spend less time (Gardner et al., 2009: McCombs, Whitaker & Yoo, 2017).

The research on OST programs that serve older youth and adolescents preparing for the transition out of high school presents a more complex portrait. Scholars have documented that after-school programs struggle to attract and retain many teens, especially older and harder-to-serve youth (Herrera, 2003; Terzian, 2009; Wimer & Harris, 2011). Furthermore, there are fewer after-school programs for teens. Scholars have conducted numerous studies seeking to understand why participation drops off, including studies that have involved interviewing teens (Borden, Perkins, Villarruel & Stone, 2005), conducting focus groups (Terzian et al., 2009), or developing case studies of programs (Herrera, 2003). The collective findings identify several reasons why participation in OST decreases dramatically through middle school and high school, including the following: teens are not necessarily motivated to seek out positive after-school alternatives because they enjoy simply hanging out with peers; they pursue other interests; they need to get jobs or are motivated to seek employment; they need to take care of siblings (Terzian, Giesen & Mbwana, 2009); or they hold negative opinions of the youth centers available to them (Borden et al, 2005). Researchers note that program attrition and lack of program options are consequential for older youth because they

are in a pivotal developmental period during which they are both at an increased level of vulnerability and also engaged in significant life-pathway decisions such as applying to college. Therefore older youth could and should be benefiting from the multi-dimensional supports available in OST programs (Pelcher & Rajan, 2016). Tichavakunda (2009) observes that OST programs occupy a unique position between home and school that allows them to leverage relationships and resources toward their future goals. Our study provides findings about the activities and program characteristics that help to keep young people engaged in OST programs during this critical transition.

What we learned: OST Programs Serve as "Third Places"

In 1982, the urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg and his colleague Dennis Brissett wrote an essay describing the virtues of "third places." They defined third places as settings that are outside the home—which is characterized as a first place—and outside of work—which they conceptualized as a second place. Third places are settings where people gather to interact with others, gain important knowledge, and experience the psychological support necessary to sustain balance and progress in one's life. As Oldenburg writes, "Third places exist outside the home and beyond the 'work lots' of modern economic production" (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982). For the youth and young adults we interviewed, programs served as a variation of a "third place" (while schools occupied the realm of work). OST programs resemble third places in that they allow participants to connect with others in spaces that are hospitable to reflection, take part in activities that build skills and knowledge about transitions, exchange ideas, have fun experiences, and create relationships (Butler & Diaz, 2016).

One particular theme germane to understanding programs as "third places" emerged in how our interviewees contrasted their experiences in programs with how they experienced the context of schools. They described the school as focused on academics and more measurable outcomes. One interviewee spoke on this, saying, "I felt like my high school's priority was only, 'Did you get accepted to college'?" The sentiment that our interviewees held for their programs versus their schools can be summarized by one participant's comments:

> [In] my high school, there were a lot of people, so getting one-on-one attention just wasn't feasible. One guidance counselor to be there for 600 [or] more students in one class, one year. So they [the OST program] offered me that one-on-one support. I had those personal relationships that I didn't get to have with teachers or with guidance counselors or with the college coordinator. She was always so busy; I remember she always looked like she was going to pass out. So just getting that help and being known mattered.

For young adults who are able to access and utilize the "third place" of an OST program, the experience can be transformational, opening doors to networks and resources they would not otherwise have access to, supporting them in identifying future selves and identities, and guiding them to develop and follow through on ambitious plans for their young adult lives. In ways such as the above, OST programs serve as "third places" that provide young people with what Oldenburg describes as "enabling" experiences and "involvement in a larger round of life" (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982, pp. 282-283). In sum, a primary finding of our study highlights how young people experienced OST programs as a variation of a "third place." We continued our analysis as a YPAR team and tried to understand those features of OST programs that young adults identified as impactful.

Six Pillars of a "Third Place" for Young People

A Sense of Belonging to a Future-Focused Community	Programs created a community of genuine care and support that young adults often described as a family or a second home. These safe and supportive spaces provided a platform for young adults to explore interests, practice skills, and build confidence in an environment they could trust and rely on, that also often reflected and affirmed their racial and cultural identities.
Envisioning Future Selves	Programs provided opportunities for young adults to think about and test out possible "future selves," exposing young adults to new opportunities, encouraging them to try out different roles, and helping them build their self-confidence in a variety of contexts.
Developing Skills for the Future	Programs provided a structure for young adults to build and practice a cluster of capacities, competencies, and skills necessary for young adulthood, such as public speaking, professional networking, and working with others. Young adults were often aware of the critical skills they were learning within the OST program and acknowledged that they had nowhere else to learn them.
Exposure to Opportunities & Building Social Capital	Programs exposed young adults to many new experiences, places, and people, often through travel (i.e., college visits, service trips) or opportunities for young adults to expand their social capital.

Individualized Support to Execute Future Plans	Programs provided often one-on-one support to young adults both to decide what pathway to pursue after high school and to execute their plans. Through consistent mentorship and providing access to resources (i.e., SAT prep courses, financial aid assistance), programs offered a level of support that schools and, often, families were not able to provide.
Ongoing Support After High School	While the types and frequency of contact may evolve after a participant leaves high school, many programs provided ongoing support even after graduation, in the form of formal or informal check-ins with alums after matriculations and through their college years, invitations to serve as mentors to younger adolescents, and developmentally appropriate programming. This ongoing support reinforced the feeling of authentic care and belonging, helped young adults stay on course, and provided a consistent go to if and when challenges arose.

A Sense of Belonging to a Future-Focused Community

> *"At my program I felt loved; I felt seen; I felt like they knew me from the inside out."*

The young people we interviewed described programs where they felt enveloped in a community that emphasized connection, caring, support, and individual appreciation. These programs prioritized helping young people be forward-thinking and develop a "right fit" plan for the future while often serving as environments that reflected and affirmed young people's racial or ethnic identity. One interviewee said, "The people in the program cared about my future. They were willing to help in every way." The people we interviewed often contrasted the experience of feeling seen, valued, and supported with their experience at school. One respondent stated that "the program was like tough love and the school was just tough, like no love involved."

Our interviewees shared numerous examples of how programs provided a sense of safety, respite, and valuable relationships with adults and peers that emphasized future planning. One interviewee reflected:

> A typical day in our program? We would meet up after school. Each of us would be in a group; we would chit-chat for a little bit, have our snacks,

> and then we would do a particular activity. I wish I could really remember exactly what kind of activities we did. I just remember feeling part of something and being happy to have space to share what I thought.

Importantly, our interviewees emphasized that while they derived a sense of belonging at the outset of joining the program, as they got older, what became important was the intentionality of care directed towards the future. Many of the interviewees used the word "family" or "second family" to describe the tenor of community in the program. As one interviewee attested, "I think the reason why I stayed is because [...] now that community feels like home. So I feel like that's my family seeing me grow and hitting small milestones and I feel like that's what is keeping me there." Other interviewees described their programs as "my team" or a "place that I always felt welcome." Baumeister and Leary (1995) describe the fundamental drive to form lasting interpersonal relationships and to maintain frequent contact with those invested in your growth and development. While some OST programs may struggle to maintain connection with youth as they age into adolescence and young adulthood, cultivating a sense of belonging and authentic community emerged as a primary reason why the young adults we interviewed stayed with their program.

One noteworthy theme emphasized how our interviewees felt that programs were spaces that reflected and affirmed their racial or ethnic identity. One interviewee explained:

> I think coming into a space where there were other students, like you, who have similar concerns and in having an adult who looked like you, because the staff was predominantly brown and black people, just reaffirmed the experiences that you're dealing with, emotions that you have, and also the challenges that you were facing and just providing solutions.

Several interviewees contrasted the racial and ethnic makeup of staff and mentors in their program with what they experienced in school. National data indicates that 79% of America's K-12 teaching force is white while only 48% of students attending public schools are white (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2020). Young people described feeling a sense of inclusion that contributed to feeling connected to the program. As one interviewee said:

> I think in terms of cultural identity, there were so many people of different backgrounds who came to the program, especially, I mean, we were mostly minority students...racial minority and ethnic minority. Because we were in [our community], we all felt celebrated.

The role of cultural responsiveness in programs is an area deserving of more research and exploration. As Simpkins, Riggs, Ngo, Vest Ettekal & Okamoto (2017) contend in a paper focused on this issue, "very little work on program quality has focused on the importance of culture, how youth's culture might be explicitly addressed in organized activities, and the effects of culture in activities on adolescent outcomes" (p. 12). Our research illuminated preliminary data that OST programs can be important spaces that support the development of racial and cultural identity, in addition to a sense of belonging and community.

Envisioning Future Selves

> *"High school was a means for me to get into college and [my OST program] was a means of me growing into the person that I am, [...] developing my passions [and] preparing for life as an adult."*

All of us engage in the work of composing stories about our future self. The stories we create provide a lens through which we interpret our past, see ourselves in the present and imagine our future. Psychologist Hazel Markus, describes this process as developing a possible self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). This process includes imagining the self in a future state that reflects who an individual would like to be (i.e., hoped-for self), who they expect to be (i.e., expected self), and who they hope not to be (i.e., feared self) (Markus & Nurius, 1987).

Our interviewees described how the activities and conversations they experienced in their OST programs stretched them toward experiences that led to exploring possible versions of their future possible selves. The OST programs did this by exposing young adults to new opportunities, encouraging them to try out various leadership roles, and helping them build their self-confidence. As one young adult said:

> The program helped me [...] see myself as a leader in the world. [When my] college advisor nominated me [for a scholarship for leaders] I was like well, that's not what I am. I don't know, I always just refrained from calling myself these big titles like leader, advocate, activist. [After they nominated me] I felt like I belonged there and then started to see that I actually deserved the scholarship, I guess, I was clear on what I am and what I do for people.

Most often, young adults shared stories of how their OST programs helped them see themselves as capable of higher education. One young adult, who grew up in a community in which attending college was outside the norm, shared how the

program helped them build a sense of possibility: "I already had a feeling I could go to college, but when I saw other people doing it, I realized there really was no reason for me to think that I couldn't." The emphasis on incrementally moving forward and developing both plans and action steps appeared to cultivate self-confidence and a drive to persist through challenges in order to reach their goals. As one young adult said, "I know there's people behind me now, so I feel more confident and more supported to do the things that I know I'm supposed to be doing."

Future thinking resembles a vital form of identity work that the *Foundations for Young Adult Success* calls "envisioning," a critically reflective experience that challenges youth to envision themselves into the future (Nagaoka, Farrington, Ehrlich & Heath, 2015). To envision means to conjure a positive image of what a young person wants to become, but also negative visions of what they want to avoid becoming (Nagaoka et al., 2015; Oyserman & Markus, 1990). Envisioning also creates conditions where young people can work to understand how specific behavior strategies can serve as a pathway or ladder to the imagined or possible self. For the young adults we interviewed, the "third place" of OST programs offered a platform to explore possible future selves and the encouragement and support they needed to try out and build their identities.

Developing Skills Needed for the Future

> *"The way [the OST program] did it was to engage different parts of you as a growing person and individual and then eventually you would reap the benefits of knowing, you know, how you're going to dress when you go to interviews, knowing how to speak to people, knowing how the college process works and, if you want to go to college, how that works, if not also how that works. [They] followed a progression that would help you eventually make decisions that would alter your life once you graduated."*

There is emerging evidence that older youth stay involved in organized programs when they feel like they are building important life skills needed for a successful transition to adulthood (Borden et al, 2005) or if they associate a link between the skills they are learning through participating in program activities and their goals for their future (Larson & Hansen, 2005). The young people we interviewed described how meaningful programs were those that prioritized building a cluster of capacities, competencies, and skills necessary for young adulthood.

For example, many of the interviewees described a version of "college prep and career readiness" workshops. Our study participants noted how helpful these activities were at the time and described how the skills and capacities that they

learned—public speaking, practicing professional networking skills, giving feedback to others, learning to engage in collaborative projects—continue to help them today. One interviewee described a series of workshops where they met professionals in various fields and practiced professional skills:

> Networking would include professional dress etiquette, email etiquette, how to network, like what would you tell a person in a thank you email, and then it will follow up with speed networking, like speed dating where professionals will come in, you would talk to them for three to four or five minutes, get their business card, move on to the next person, and that will probably happen for an hour. So not only are you meeting different people you're getting different networks and also exploring and practicing skills.

Another theme that emerged was that programs provide a space to practice skills of collaboration, shared decision making, and the processes central to teamwork. As one interviewee attested:

> We hear all the time that communications and group work is central to success in college and career. In our program, we worked together to launch projects, put on activities, and we were always working together to make those things happen. What was also important was that it was multi-age. Young people, working with older participants and then working with adults in the program and in the community.

Another interviewee expressed appreciation for how the program emphasized work habits and the capacity for self-regulation:

> [The program provided] routine and that discipline helped me transition into college because I felt I had structure. I would have had a lot more freedom if I didn't have that program and the discipline that it instilled in me, but I would have been a lot more lost coming to college too. It's hard to explain. I don't want to say I would have been less prepared.[...] Routine and discipline, when given in a healthy way, can help you prepare for other things in your life.

Many of the young adults we interviewed affirmed that one reason they stayed in their programs was that they knew it was helping them build practical skills for their futures. Additionally, most also shared an appreciation for the opportunity to learn those skills in a comfortable setting, and that they continue to draw on those skills today.

Exposure to Opportunities & Building Social Capital

> *"Being in this program enhanced my perspective. I got to see a little bit of a bigger picture. A lot of times I felt like my neighborhood or my block was as far as I could go. My radius was West Philadelphia. Being in this program and seeing different things really expanded my horizons so I could say 'Wow there's stuff outside my community'."*

A key aspect highlighted by our interviewees focused on how programs encouraged young people to broaden their horizons, providing exposure to unfamiliar people and experiences. Our interviewees described the value of visits to cultural events, opportunities to visit workplaces and colleges, hearing speakers talk about their work and life, and getting to know staff from various professional backgrounds in the program. Interviewees described the impact of meeting people working in diverse fields, including poets, non-profit leaders, and finance executives. Sometimes these opportunities involved traveling outside of the state or even outside of the country—opportunities more often afforded to young adults from middle and high income families. As one interviewee said, "my school didn't have resources, so I felt like I had to seek that elsewhere. The program gave me the opportunity to study abroad in Guatemala, for three weeks as a service trip. If it wasn't for the program I wouldn't have been able to do that." Those experiences in turn helped these young adults envision themselves working in different fields or exploring new interests.

As young people move closer to young adulthood, they become attentive to the benefit of forging a broad array of connections with others. They sense that forming personal connections with others enables them to progress towards their goals for future education or career. The young adults we interviewed highlighted that their OST programs provided a myriad of opportunities to build these kinds of social capital and network building. According to the Search Institute, social capital can be defined as the resources that arise from a web of relationships which people can access and mobilize to help them improve their lives and achieve their goals, which inevitably shift over time. All youth and young adults need and benefit from positive adult relationships and connections that feel relevant to their educational and occupation interests. These relationships connect them to valuable resources and opportunities (Scales, Boat & Pekel, 2020). Young people explicitly described how programs helped them expand their social network and build influential relationships that continue to serve them as they move into young adulthood. One interviewee described a speed networking activity that her program provided where she was able to meet a range of professionals and learn about how they started their

career. The conversation became the launch point for a more substantive connection. This young adult explained:

> I met one of my mentors at a networking event when I thought I wanted to be a lawyer. And she ended up being somebody who helped me with my writing and eventually mentor[ed] me, so I feel like if it wasn't for the program I wouldn't have developed a strong connection to a person in my network, who I value so much and who has helped me figure out my path.

A number of interviewees highlighted how programs helped link them to internships, jobs, or programs, often in the summer, that were aligned with their emerging interests and engaged them in critical thinking. For example, one interviewee explained:

> There was a summer program that gave you the opportunity to live on a college campus for two weeks. You just got to take classes and stuff like that. [...] The summer part was fun and the in-school part was also fun, but maybe a more appropriate word is enlightening. We learned about domestic violence and (un)healthy relationships; so, I feel like that started me on a really good track.

In sum, programs provided an array of opportunities for young people to expand their horizons and engage in experiences that helped them imagine their futures.

Individualized Support to Navigate the Transition

> *"I think these programs are like a third parent or fourth parent [...] It's a card that you constantly have in your wallet, or in the back of your phone, and you can just pull it out. It's a series of skills that you might not think [about]."*

Deciding what to do after high school and executing a plan successfully requires a multitude of skills, resources, and connections. Most of the young adults we interviewed decided to attend college, and shared how critical the support they received from their OST programs was in helping them navigate their applications, financial aid, and the transition into higher education. Few decisions matter more to a young person's future than the decision to attend college and earn a degree (Brock, 2010), yet research has shown that many low-income, first-generation college-going students often face particular challenges in navigating the college enrollment process. Without a parent who is knowledgeable about the college process, or the kind of frequent, consistent support they need from high school

counselors, first generation students often confront obstacles navigating a pathway through higher education. By way of example, a significant study of Chicago students found that only 41% of Chicago public school students who aspire to complete a four-year degree actually do (Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca & Moeller, 2008). Given that context, the layers of support that our interviewees described were both unique and invaluable to their ability to execute their plans. Our interviewees overwhelmingly described relentless support and vigilance provided by the programs to guide them through and help them manage the transition process. As one young person explained, the program helped them at every step of the way:

> The program helped me get into college. The people in that program sat with me and helped me fill out my applications. They read my essays; they checked my financial aid, my FAFSA, after I did it at home in order to make sure it was where it needed to be. They helped me do every single thing you have to do to get into college. They even helped me with my scholarships and all that stuff.

The ability of programs to provide real-time, incremental, and sustained support throughout the process was identified by our interviewees as a critical asset.

Our interviewees also described the tangible resources that OST programs provided them in navigating the process. One interviewee explained,

> When I joined, they provided me with a lot of resources, like an agenda, [...] a laptop, books, etc. And there was always somebody there in the office that I could go talk to. That was really, really helpful for me because they're right there, you know what I mean? Giving me the agenda and giving me just tips and tricks helped self-motivate.

OST programs offered SAT prep courses, one-on-one guidance in writing college essays, and intentional support working with families to understand financial aid packages. This personalized, consistent support helped young adults build and sustain motivation to persist through the process. One interviewee explained:

> I remember moments where I just wanted to give up. I didn't want to do any more essays, I was so tired of writing essays. So tired of it, and my mentor just kept urging [me] to keep going, and kept reminding me, you know you can do this, this will be done, and you will go to school and college soon. He really did help me out with that a lot.

In describing the support received in programs, our interviewees often compared the level of support to what they were experiencing in school. Many of the interviewees described school personnel in a positive or neutral register, but pointed out that the school counselors were overwhelmed. For example:

> My high school counselor [...] had to speak to and go over college applications with like 400 students. My high school was huge, whereas this program, the number of seniors per class was about 20 maybe, sometimes even less. [...] All of the faculty knew how to get students into college. This is something that they all focused on. So it was pretty much one to one support and sometimes it would be more... at one point around my laptop I probably had five faculty members looking at my laptop at one time trying to help me to do my application.

OST programs provide the personalized and ongoing support that young adults require as they attempt to navigate one of the biggest transitions of their lives.

Ongoing Support After High School

> *"If I ever need anything I know that they'll be around."*

Once the young adults we spoke with finished high school, their relationship with their OST programs shifted. For some, even though formal programming ended, they maintained informal contact with program staff, mentors and peers. For others, the programming evolved, often moving the young adults into a new category of programming for "College Scholars" or alumni mentors. Many of the young people we interviewed stayed involved and connected with their programs either formally or informally. As one young person said:

> While I left the program, I still communicate with the people there. I sent an email to the current career advisor, and he asked me to do a virtual campus tour for current juniors and sophomores at the school. We do alum social hours every month and so I get to see them every month and talk to them. I'll email them when I get into a grad school and the director always sends me an email back congratulating me. So, I still feel all that support that I felt in high school. I still feel that now, and I believe that will continue for as long as I want it to.

The ongoing support many of these young adults experience affirms the authentic care that helped to engage them in the program in the first place.

The experiences of the young adults we interviewed fell into two general categories: formal program continuation and information relationships. Some OST programs have established developmentally appropriate support systems for program participants after they age out of the program. One participant described an alumni gathering this way:

> There's [a] college summit every year—we have this professional development where we meet different people in different kinds of fields, and then we learn so many different things. They do one workshop on health and wellness; they do another workshop on racism in the U.S.…just kind of helping us to grow in our knowledge and understanding of the world, along with the professional side.

Several other interviewees described how their programs had hired "coaches"' who reached out to them while they were in college to meet with them, stay connected, and support long-range planning. One young adult told the story of how the program helped guide her to apply to a residential college. She attributed the support of the program to expanding her horizons about the possibility of a residential college after they took her on a college tour when she was a junior in high school. After enrolling, she hit a moment of indecision during her sophomore year and was preparing to move back to New York City. She eventually reached out to staff in the program for help. She explained, "They listened. They were there for me. They helped me work through the decision." The relationships that participants forged with staff are assets that extend beyond the moment of program graduation.

Conclusion: "Third Places" as Spaces for Active Reflection and Forward Movement

Our participatory action research began in an effort to understand why young people who graduated from a successful OST program encountered momentum-stopping adversity during young adulthood. Our initial study identified a range of obstacles that thwarted and undermined young people's original plans after high school. The second study examined how particular programs could help young adults move forward in their lives.

The first study focused on 30 interviews of young adults in one particular community. The second study utilized a purposeful sample of 20 participants who participated in OST programs. While our findings add to an emerging literature on the role of "OST programs" in supporting young adults, we acknowledge that this is an exploratory study and that more systematic research needs to be conducted before these findings can be generalized. Importantly, almost all our interviewees for the second study were either enrolled in or had completed college. We recognize

the limitations of our sample and believe that similar studies can be conducted with young adults who transition into the workforce or non-work settings.

In this YPAR project, we prioritized both reflection and action over the course of our project. Reporting thoroughly on action steps is outside of the scope of this paper, however, our efforts included several presentations to community leaders and at public events about our findings; development of a resource guide for young adults and those who support them in Springfield, MA; and a pilot fellowship program for young adults. At the time of this article's submission, this YPAR project continues to operate. Our research team continues to meet weekly to plan our actions steps, which will result in further sharing what we have learned both about the experiences of young adults and the steps OST programs can take to support the transition to young adulthood.

For the young adults that we interviewed in this YPAR project, it is clear that participating in OST programs during their junior and senior years of high school, and staying connected with the program even after high school, was transformational. These findings have implications for OST programs, including Project Coach, both because they can be used to inform the design of the curriculum and specific supports that programs provide to youth as they transition into young adulthood, and because they help us better understand the outcomes for which we are designing programs in the first place. Our findings also have resource implications for systems serving young people. Clearly, OST participation was supportive in helping meet long-term goals (Larson & Hansen, 2005), but more than that, this "third place" provided a developmental context that supported identity development, future focus, and so much more. The OST programs we heard about provided a mix of structured activities along with space for informal social interactions and encouragement to engage in ongoing reflection about life choices and strategic decisions. These processes happen in a variety of contexts across the programs we learned about and it is through a broad array of experiences that we develop (Nagaoka, et al., 2015). This development doesn't just come from experience, it comes from interpreting, making meaning, and reflecting on experiences:

> But if experience is to have lasting benefit, it must be assigned meanings and integrated into one's emerging sense of identity... Critical to this process are strong, supportive, and sustained relationships with caring adults who can encourage young people to reflect on their experiences and help them interpret those experiences in ways that expand their sense of themselves and their horizons. (Nagaoka et al., 2015, p. 44)

At its core, programs that function as "third places" provide the opportunity to engage in an array of experiences, the support to make sense of them, and the systems to turn ideas into action.

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