4-H Campus Immersion: Addressing educational inequities through local collaborations

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**ABSTRACT**

Many young people aspire to go to college, but there is a gap between their aspirations for higher education and their enrollment (Roderick, Naoka, & Coca, 2009). This is an important gap to address because lower levels of educational attainment are associated with higher levels of poverty (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). In order to effectively address this grand challenge, the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development has collaborated with community organizations, University of Minnesota STEM departments, STEM industries, youth, and families to design and implement a program that offers young people who experience educational barriers an opportunity to imagine and plan for a future life they value in and through higher education.

**PROGRAM OVERVIEW**

**PURPOSE**

This program was designed to promote educational equity and opportunity for young people who face educational barriers and support their abilities to achieve their aspirations for higher education. 22 middle school youth stayed on the University of Minnesota St. Paul campus for 4 days and 3 nights. Middle school youth are the program target because it is during these adolescent years that youth make the decision to go to college, and more importantly, when they start taking steps to make that decision a reality (Balfanz, 2009).

A literature review on educational disparities informed the development of the program design and is summarized below:

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

1) Often youth with a low SES, despite desires to pursue aspirations, interests, and talents, have fewer practical opportunities to explore them (Appadurai, 2004).

2) Reflective thinking and future planning fosters youths’ abilities to take action to achieve their aspirations (DeJaeghere & Baxter, 2014).

3) Imagining oneself as a college student strengthens one’s ability to achieve this aspiration (DeJaeghere, 2016; Nurmi, 2002).

4) Aspirations are socially facilitated. Sharing aspirations with others, like family members, helps youth act upon their aspirations and navigate their educational trajectory (DeJaeghere, 2016).

**PROGRAM DESIGN**

**YOUTH PARTICIPANTS**

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<td>American Indian or Alaskan Native</td>
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**PARTNERSHIP DEVELOPMENT**

- Community partners were developed during a 6-month period before the start of the grant, in which the University of Minnesota Extension and partnering community organizations developed a memorandum of agreement around collaboratively building youth programs.

- Community partners engaged youth and their families (none of whom had previous overnight experience) in the program through a series of phone-calls, home-visits, and informational meetings.

- University and corporate partnerships were forged and developed through a 12-month period. Extension staff engaged in a series of 1-1 meetings with department and corporate representatives to engage them on a shared self-interest of providing educational opportunities to youth.

**EVALUATION METHODS**

Observation (45 hours) * Collection of program documents * Youth interviews (N = 22)

**NEXT STEPS**

- Planning for the campus immersion 2016 is underway.
- A 12-month, longitudinal study on youth agency and aspirations will begin, starting at the next campus immersion.

**PROGRAM IMPACT**

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

1) Exploring STEM topics with faculty and students helped youth explore the links between aspirations and achievement.

UMN STEM students and faculty engaged youth in hands-on STEM learning while also discussing their personal pathways to higher education. In addition to helping youth explore STEM, it helped young people explore pathways to aspiration achievement. For example, a youth aspiring to be an astronaut was able to connect with a UMN student currently studying in the field and then was able to explore his interest of the solar system at the Bell Museum’s planetarium. Previously, his connection to his field of interest was limited to textbooks and television.

2) Engaging in future planning fostered both nervousness and preparedness.

Young people participated in a series of 4-H curricular activities in which they critically reflected on who they are and who believes in them, identified obstacles and supports to their aspirations, and developed an educational portfolio in which they devised a plan to achieve their aspirations for higher education. Youth said these activities made them “nervous” because the pathway to college was harder than they expected, but the challenges were worth conquering. One youth reflected on the “Higher ed obstacle course” activity: ‘I learned it’s hard to do [prepare for college], but it’s for stuff I care about. That’s what 4-H is doing for us, helping us look in our hearts and reach our dreams.’

3) Experiencing campus life helped youth develop a college-going identity.

Young people stayed in dorms, ate in the cafeteria, rode the campus connector, and played soccer on the mall. In interviews, youth consistently identified campus life as the highlight of their experience. One youth identified as a college student: “The best part was that they gave us a gold key card thing that let us get into the dorms. That’s where we lived as college students.”

4) Sharing campus experiences with their family members supported youths’ aspirations.

At the end of the immersion experience, family members attended a showcase dinner at which the youth presented highlights of their experiences, their aspirations, and their plans for participation. Sharing with their family members instilled youth with excitement and pride. A mother commented to a staff after the showcase: “I’ve never seen him this excited about anything.”

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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