YOUNG ADULT CAPACITY INITIATIVE
CROSS-SITE ANALYSIS

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INTRODUCTION

Introduction

This cross-site analysis presents findings about the implementation, impact, and outcomes of the Young Adult Capacity Initiative (YACI), at 13 community-based organizations in New York City. These agencies received technical assistance and small incentive grants from the Fund for the City of New York Youth Development Institute (YDI) to build their capacity to address the needs of "disconnected" young adults. The Academy for Educational Development (AED) studied five of these sites intensively and produced case studies in a separate document. AED also produced a separate report of findings from a longitudinal survey of YACI participants.

This cross-site analysis was undertaken to foster understanding of the overall initiative and thus contribute to the knowledge base in several areas, including the needs of disconnected youth, youth development in general, community-based young adult services, and the effective provision of technical assistance (TA) to community-based, youth-serving organizations. AED and YDI identified a set of issues and topics they considered important for interpreting the case-study data and "telling the story." The cross-site findings show a broad range of implementation types and programming particulars, as well as program challenges and success factors. Findings derived from this breadth of experience illuminate ways to implement, sustain, and scale up programming to address the needs of disconnected youth and young adults—an underserved segment of the youth population.

The Need for Disconnected Youth Services

Many American youth spend a crucial period of their young adult lives "discon-nected" from the broader society—not enrolled in school, not gainfully employed, not in the military, and not married to someone who is "connected" through one of these avenues. These criteria distinguish between young people who are actively involved in the broader society and those who, for a lengthy period of time, are not. Many young people go through this period of disconnectedness as they move from adolescence to adulthood. Often, when youth are disconnected for prolonged periods they suffer long-term social and economic problems and experience significant hardship, even into their mid and late twenties.[1]

In general, policies and programs for young adults are fragmented and inadequate. However, the issue goes beyond inadequate services—in addition, the vision and policies focused on the needs of America's disconnected young adults are inadequate. Using a youth development approach, YDI initiated YACI not only to raise awareness within, and build the capacity of, community-based

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[1] The introduction to the YACI case studies presents a more detailed description of the numbers of, and challenges facing, disconnected youth and young adults, especially given ongoing changes in the workplace.

organizations to address the needs of disconnected young adults, ages 16-24 years, but also to increase awareness among scholars, educators, and policymakers about the dilemmas of disconnection within this population.

THE YACI PROGRAM

The YACI Program

With funding from The Pinkerton Foundation, The Clark Foundation, Chevron-Texaco Foundation, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, YACI's overall goal was to build the capacity of the selected community-based organizations to provide disconnected young adults with the resources and supports needed to make a successful transition to independent, healthy adulthood. In 2003, 13 organizations received the first of their small annual YDI grants ($20,000-$60,000) to assess and build their capacity to address the needs of the disconnected young adults in their communities.

YDI's Role

Beyond the initial grants, YDI offered a wide range of TA and support to the sites. This TA included discussions with agency leadership, site visits by YDI staff, and development of a management information system. TA also included site visits between participating agencies, as well as networking meetings and forums where information and ideas were exchanged among the 13 sites and with experts in the field of youth development, disconnected youth, education, and employment. These experts included academics who had studied the status of young adults and city and national policymakers in education and social services.

Over the three years, YDI's TA to the sites changed in ways that were intended to more precisely meet site-specific needs and reflect the more mature status of the program. During the early part of YACI, sites needed information about resources available for this population, as well as about the youth development philosophy and how best to use their membership in YACI in ways that were collegial and mutually beneficial. In order to meet these needs, YDI conducted a series of meetings to introduce staff from various sites to one another, disseminate needed information, and discuss a series of topics/issues chosen by YDI staff and YACI site administrators. Various formats were used for these meetings—for example, there were chat sessions, called "coffee klatches," based on topics suggested by the sites, as well as more formal network meetings of program staff. In addition, visits by YDI staff to individual sites allowed for more individualized assistance, helping sites deepen their work in ways particular to each setting. Many YACI staff testified to the value of the TA provided by YDI. A typical comment included:

YDI helped me build capacity in so many ways. They looked over my database. They brought in a consultant to look over my proposals, promotional materials. Their support with fundraising has been incredible.

As the initiative progressed, other forms of TA emerged as YDI staff perceived the needs of sites and as program staff requested activities and particular types of assistance. For example, all 13 sites were organized into peer groups that

made scheduled visits to the different sites in their group, allowing them to see YACI implemented in other settings. One YACI staff person attested to the value of this networking:

I get to talk to the other sites and see they have the same issues we have, and someone else says this is what we did, and I realize we can implement that too. So I realize there are solutions out there.

AED's Role

YDI contracted with the Academy for Educational Development to conduct a three-year evaluation of YACI focusing on implementation and capacity building in five of the 13 organizations receiving YACI funding. The evaluation looked at YDI'S impact in supporting and strengthening the sites. The evaluation focused on the implementation of YACI and YDI's capacity-building work. YDI also asked AED to assess progress in reaching key short-term outcomes—reducing obstacles young adults face to participating in the YACI program and increasing their participation in, and attachment to, the program. The study drew on the expertise of YDI staff, site staff, numerous experts in the field, and publications concerned with young adult disconnection.

The five YACI programs participating in AED's evaluation were selected to represent the diversity of the funded programs and vary in location, model, and capacity. All five sites are located in low-income communities in which the lead agencies have strong connections. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were employed over three years to identify the strengths, challenges and contributions of this initiative. These approaches included case studies as well as surveys of the five sites to allow for comparison of YACI participants' attitudes, educational and work-readiness status, aspirations, and barriers to achievement of their goals early in their experience with the program with these same »indicators after approximately six months of participation in YACI. This cross-site report, as a companion to the survey report and the case studies, provides evidence of effectiveness and ongoing challenges for YACI programs in providing service to this disconnected young adult population.

FINDINGS

Findings

The rest of this report presents findings in the following areas: organizational structure and capacity, program capacity, and the experiences of youth participants.

Organizational Structure

The five sites included a variety of organization types, including one established agency with an annual budget in the millions of dollars, which has served youth and families for over a century, to newer organizations of 25 to 30 years. Four of the agencies were large, with one serving 16 community centers and 14,000 children and adults through 16 different programs. One agency was small and independent and was established especially to address the needs of disconnected young adults. Two YACI programs are located in New York City Beacons,[2] which, through their YACI grants, increased the resources they had available to address this population. All the agencies are located in high-poverty neighborhoods, some of which have unemployment rates more than triple the national and citywide average.

Organizational Capacity to Address the Needs of Disconnected Youth

Educating Agency Leadership about the Needs of Disconnected Youth

Although all five sites had missions to serve youth and young adults, three sites had no dedicated programming or services solely for this population, while two sites did serve out-of-school youth with employment services. Through the YACI experience, with YDI assistance and interaction with their YACI peers, all sites became more reflective about disconnected young people, the types of services and staffing needed to serve them effectively, and the data systems required to carry out this mission well.

Thus, for the most part, provision of services for disconnected youth was a gap in the community that YACI filled, and, in some cases, the whole organization—including agency leadership, staff, and advisory boards—was educated about disconnected youth and more importantly, how the particular agency could serve this population in ways appropriate for the community. Many YACI and agency staff attested to the value of YDI in making them aware of, and helping them increase capacity to address the needs of these young people. Typical comments in this vein included:

I never heard of disconnected youth before YACI, and even if we had understood about the population, we wouldn't have known what we could do.

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[2] School-based community centers funded and administered by the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development offering a great range of activities and services to participants of all ages, before and after school, in the evenings, and on weekends.

It was like this epiphany. Taking on YACI really deepened our work, and we realized this is the way we want to move forward.

The combination of TA and policy work has created a buzz and a synergy in New York City. It's on everyone's radar now. People are saying, "We have to do something about dropout rates," and in the beginning, this was just not the case.

Grantmaking and Partnerships

Beyond educating sites about the needs of the young adult population, the YDI grant and the YACI program helped sites build their capacity to address the needs of this underserved population by leveraging further funding and support both from within the agency, as well as from foundation and city agencies. One site received six additional grants, both private and public, as a result of leveraging the YACI grant and YDI's assistance with grantwriting. Another site also used its YACI work to leverage grants from outside agencies. A typical comment in this vein included:

Being able to list and describe YACI under "previous experience" demonstrates that we already have experience running programs like these.

Agency staff also reported the usefulness of the YACI program (and the outside funding) for advocating within the agency for further supports and services:

I advocated for an on-site GED class—I got it. I asked for a GED teacher—the organization is paying her salary. I asked for money to cover some of our wraparound services—I got it.

The success of these leveraging efforts in bringing new funding for this disconnected population and the overall increased commitment of agencies to this population demonstrated the effectiveness of YDI's strategy to seed these agencies with small grants and then provide intensive TA to help them seek further funding and support to expand programming. Even agencies that had previously served this population made use of the YACI grants. One agency director stated:

This agency has a long history of supporting students to improve their economic status. That's why we provide technology and career-readiness training. YACI is an enhancement and extension of the work we already did.

In addition, YACI programs were able to foster and solidify partnership agreements within the larger organization and with neighborhood programs and organizations to offer employment opportunities to YACI participants. Some sites created internships within the agency for YACI participants, allowing the young adults to experience a work-like setting while still in the protective environment of the YACI site. Over time these funding successes and partnerships created more

organizational commitment to serve disconnected youth. In addition, the number of youth affected increased, some of whom were hired by the program or agency (or volunteered in the program), providing good role models for current participants. In addition one site placed YACI graduates with community employers—a large hospital, a local museum, large chain stores, and a union training program.

Use of Data

YDI helped sites improve their ability to collect and manage participant data. In many sites, this entailed implementation and use of the newly developed METRIX data system, allowing sites to manage data on large groups of participants and use it for program improvement. Specific YDI assistance in the use of METRIX included suggestions for data fields, questions to "ask" the system, and using the results to assess impact and make informed decisions about programming.

The information generated by sites' improved MIS capacity also increased the quality of agency reports and proposals, thus strengthened the chances for additional funding and helped build support for the program among agency staff and boards of directors. In two sites, as advisory board members became more aware of the YACI program, they became more supportive, attending YACI events and including the needs of the disconnected population in their decisions about organizational development and funding priorities. Several YACI staff commented on YDI's help with data and fundraising, as well as the increased use of data to determine "what's really happening" with the program. A typical commented included:

The technology is what I find the most helpful. At a moment's notice, we'll be able to get data.

Program Capacity

Numbers of Youth Served

From interviewing site staff and reviewing site reports for YDI, it was determined that over the three-year evaluation period, the five YACI sites served approximately 1,319 young adults. The range was from 33 to 487 for the five sites—in ascending order, 33, 107, 137, 430, and 487. What made the difference between the sites that served the most and those that served the fewest were factors such as the following:

❋ The size of the space allocated for the program and the extent to which other programs competed for this space (e.g., the site that was able to use all its space for YACI participants served the most young adults).

❋ The efficacy of initial recruitment efforts (e.g., the site serving the lowest number of participants had the most severe recruitment problems, which endured into the program's second year).

❋ The number and type of staff dedicated to the disconnected youth population (most sites found that they needed more social service staff than originally planned and that the recruitment and intake processes were more complex than for other youth).

The total of 1,319 young adults served is remarkable—this population is considered hard to serve, and this number represents the participants of only five of the 13 sites where YACI was implemented.

Changes in Program Capacity

As expected, program start up was more difficult in sites with no experience serving disconnected young adults, but all sites experienced some challenges in addressing the needs of this population. For example:

❋ Several sites misjudged the amount of time and staff necessary to recruit and retain participants. They found the needs of the disconnected youth were so varied and complex that participants could not take advantage of the educational and employment offerings without additional support.

❋ In one community it was found that so many subgroups of disconnected youth existed that the site could not serve them all. As a result, the site decided to address the needs of the "recently disconnected," including some youth who were still in school but were at high risk of dropping out.

❋ A different site enrolled many participants who had been out of school for a long time and thus especially alienated from educational settings. This site had to use very direct strategies, such as calling the home of non-attenders and paying transportation costs for those in financial need, as well as providing agency internships for participants who attended regularly for 90 days.

❋ All sites learned that "employment counseling is more about youth development than about actually getting the young people jobs," and stressed the importance of "training young adults in the 'softer skills,' like negotiating a workplace, showing up on time, and interacting with a boss."

To put this last point another way, most YACI staff spoke of the need to distinguish between what youth said they needed and what they really needed:

Participants come in saying they need a GED, but they need so much more than that.

When [we] started the YACI program, [we] tried to match what youth said they wanted—to get their GED—so we started a GED program. They also said they wanted a job, so we looked at job placement. But…what they don't express

are the other needs that get in their way, the abuse and depression that they have at home. This all comes to the front as you get into the work.

Some sites changed the program in ways that were more appropriate to the needs of the participants. One site altered its orientation from a one-step process to a multi-step orientation that kept participants coming to the site several times in order to display the determination necessary to participate in YACI successfully. The YACI director at this site especially cited YDI's training on the importance of fostering the active involvement of youth as influencing the decision to institute such changes in the program. Another site embarked on a major agencywide reorganization of its youth services, seeking to create a net-work of services aimed at young adults, generally, and young adults who are out of school, more specifically. Another site invested in up-to-date testing materials to enable staff to administer an appropriate test and thus provide a positive test-ing experience for young people and obtain a more accurate result. When young adults in the five sites were interviewed, they cited the flexibility of YACI—in scheduling, for example—as a positive factor. While this flexibility was sometimes challenging for program staff, sites recognized it as an important aspect of any program attempting to address the needs of the disconnected population.

Other changes in programming are discussed below under youth development, social and interpersonal support for participants, and resources, space and staff.

Youth Development

At all five intensively studied sites, AED evaluators noticed many efforts to implement the major elements of effective youth development programming, as developed by YDI:

* Welcoming and supportive environments to help young people build positive relationships with both peers and staff

* A sense of safety, seen as crucial to the development of caring relationships

* Engaging activities and opportunities for youth to contribute to the YACI project and their own development

* A future orientation

Following the YDI workshops, site staff reviewed the youth development principles with the intention of integrating them into their YACI planning and programming. Even at sites where a youth development approach was used previously, this re-immersion into the approach along with other sites implementing similar programming made this approach more comprehensive.

AED observations provided ample evidence that YACI staff were successful in their attempts to create a welcoming and safe space in the program. In the

baseline and follow-up surveys given to YACI youth in 2005, over 90 percent of youth said they felt safe in the program and agency. Some participants used phrases such as a "family atmosphere" to describe the program. Typical YACI participant and staff comments about safety included:

The building and the program feel safe. I wouldn't go if it didn't feel safe.

From day one, at orientation, we tell them we run this program like a business . . . There are no hoodlums, no hoodlum-like behavior here. Teachers reinforce this everyday.

Many YACI staff also described the importance of establishing enduring, trusting relationships with participants as the basis for helping them move ahead with education and employment. One agency director maintained:

Once that relationship has been established, then I can guide the young people through the options they have, but they have to trust first or they won't put any weight on what I say.

Many YACI participants described their respect and appreciation for program staff, who they felt were advocates for them. Participants also described the respect they felt for their peers and the safety they felt in the program to be themselves and to learn. In one site, the GED teacher's attachment to the students was described by youth as a major program strength. Another factor that helped foster enduring relationships with caring adults at YACI was the fact that some program staff were community residents. Participants especially cited these staff members as influencing their success in the program and on exams such as the GED. Youth at one site described a college representative who talked with them about college life. What was most important about this guest speaker was that this person "looked like us:"

It made it look like if they could do it, we could do it. You don't have to go to the best college in the world to get a good education. It opened up my eyes.

At all sites, evaluators documented attempts to address the developmental needs of young adults with an array of skill-building workshops, activities, events, internships, and supports. At all sites, evaluators also documented attempts to give young people an orientation toward the future, especially in activities having to do with career planning. Staff worked with participants to help them articulate better what they needed, and in some sites, individual plans of action were devised with participant input to lead to the goals the young adult needed to reach. YACI participants at one site also took part in recreational trips, such as visiting the local library or going to films, or visiting social service agencies—for many these trips were the first time they had left Brooklyn or even their own neighborhood.

Typical YACI participant comments illustrating a sense of the future and of the "big world out there" include the following:

They taught us that the world is so much bigger than East Flatbush, Crown Heights . . . or Brooklyn. There's a lot out there.

Public assistance wanted me to work for my check. I wanted to finish my education. What kind of job am I going to get with no high school diploma?

I've gotten my education back. My vocabulary has changed. I've definitely become more responsible. I even bought an alarm clock. I'm on the ball now!

YDI's part in this was to review or introduce these principles and expand on them, often with staff throughout the agency, thus making the use of youth development deeper and more systematic. Interviewed staff spoke often of the helpfulness of what one agency staff person called YDI's "science." His staff were instinctively following youth development principles, the director maintained, but YDI provided a framework from which to conceptualize the program as a whole, to ensure that all staff are "talking the same language." He elaborated this point:

What YDI has done is name what we do, and now I can sit down with all the staff and go through each principle—let's take safety—and ask how we are going to make sure every participant feels safe. Now we are all on the same page.

Education and Employment Components

By the end of the three years, all five intensively studied sites provided their young adult participants with GED and pre-GED programs on site. Sites that had previously referred youth to GED programs in the surrounding community eventually developed their own in-house programs because of the need to better track and integrate how participants were progressing in all phases of their development and understand their continuing needs. For example, one site added a summer GED class, while another added new space for the young adult GED and computer training programs. As an enrichment to this basic education piece, some sites included classes in more advanced computer applications such as graphics, animation, and Microsoft certification. One site tried to enhance participants' use of the electronic communication skills needed in many job settings by providing email accounts for youth participants. Survey findings related to these education components of YACI are the following:

❋ Of the 15 participants in a pre-GED program at baseline, almost half (47%) had moved on to a regular GED program and the same percentage were still in the pre-GED program. One had earned a GED.

❋ Of the 14 registered to take the GED exam at baseline, the majority (57%) were still in a GED class.

❋ Overall, more respondents wanted to attain a college degree at follow-up than at baseline (41% versus 26%), and fewer respondents aspired to a graduate degree (21% versus 37%). This latter statistic may indicate that the program generated more realistic educational expectations for participants.

❋ At two sites in communities with very high unemployment rates, participants reported that they remained in the program in order to attain educational goals, knowing this was the path to improve their employability.

Youth also appreciated the tutoring and support they received, which helped them learn subjects they were unable to learn in high school:

It took a lot of maneuvering but East Side fought for me to get an education. I'm in the GED class and I take the computer training, and I take an extra math class because I'm not too good in math.

Yes, the work I was doing in high school was very confusing. In high school I didn't understand algebra. Here I understand because the teacher breaks down the problem. . . . I come here because the people here give me hope.

In terms of employment components, all sites also offered job-skills and career readiness training, such as interviewing techniques, resume writing, job searching, and goal setting. Additional employment-related support was offered at two sites that provided internships on-site for YACI participants requiring them to use job and social skills they would need on the outside while remaining in the supportive environment of the program. One site kept a database of local internships that offered possibilities for its participants; another maintained strong ties in the commercial sector of the surrounding neighborhood; and one site placed YACI graduates with community employers—a large hospital, a local museum, large chain stores, and a union training program.

YDI had an important role in helping sites devise these employment-related components, including providing an employment workshop series. In addition, YDI staff grouped sites with similar programming together during peer exchanges, allowing discussions to be targeted to specific ways of operating and serving the young adults. At one site, YDI helped solidify the employment component by providing job-readiness materials and training in a career information website. One YACI program director stated:

[I have received] some great ideas on job readiness and gathered enough material to run a series of 10-12 job readiness workshops. I have materials on communica-tion, which is a big barrier for some of our young people. I have information on

conflict resolution, another huge topic for our participations. I even have a sheet on 150 ways to keep your job!

Findings about the employment component gathered from the survey and interviews are the following:

❋ The percentage of participants with resumes rose from 45% to 72%, a statistically significant difference.

❋ The percentage of respondents unemployed and looking for work decreased from 60% at baseline to 46% at follow up.

As stated above, the sites learned that "employment counseling is more about youth development than about actually getting the young people jobs." One agency executive director stated:

Jobs are just a small part of the equation—we are now more focused on developing employment skills and have a stronger push towards college for disconnected youth.

An agency deputy director stated:

We are giving youth hope, skills to make them marketable, such as: interview skills, ways to succeed in education [like computer classes], opportunities to volunteer to have things to put on their job resume, and ways to learn how to navigate and make decisions for themselves.

Resources, Space, and Staff

Expectedly, the sites differed from each other in terms of the resources, space, and staff available for the YACI program. As stated above under organizational structure, four of the agencies were large, with one including 16 community centers and serving 14,000 children and adults through 16 different programs, while one agency was small and independent of any larger agency and was established especially to address the needs of youth. Two YACI programs are located in Beacon centers. One site could incorporate YACI into all of its space since it already served youth with a variety of education and employment services, while two sites renovated or reconfigured their original space to better accommodate YACI. For example, one of these sites moved the program to a larger space where there was better access to computers.

Most YACI staff were described by evaluators as caring workers, well aware of youth development principles and increasingly knowledgeable about disconnected youth. Evaluators also noted that, as the program progressed, staff moved from being uncertain about their roles to being good instructors and leaders. Two sites began their programs noticeably understaffed for the proposed work, and

as the program progressed it became clearer that recruiting, assisting and maintaining young adults in the program took much time and energy from several staff members, each with a different set of skills but who had to work well together.

Once the staff needs were identified, sites hired new staff members and/or changed the configuration of staff roles to fit the needs of the program. Many staff increases were due to the leveraging of YACI funding with new funders, which allowed for more targeted and comprehensive services. At one site where recruitment was the most challenging barrier, an outreach coordinator was hired with new funding leveraged from the initial grant. Another site hired a GED teacher to bring GED services on site. Still another hired a deputy director for YACI when recruitment efforts became more successful and the program moved to a larger space.

YACI program staff had continual contact with the young adults. Three-quarters of participants completing the follow-up survey reported having contact with program staff once a week or more: 71% had contact a few times a week or more, and 4% had contact approximately once a week. As a further measure of participant connectedness to adults in the program, the following findings from the survey show the reasons that participants might stay in touch with program staff:

* If they wanted to continue their education: 94%

* If they wanted more job skills training, had problems at work, or wanted to find a new job: 81%

* If they wanted to talk about how things in their lives were going: 67%

Many program participants spoke highly of YACI staff—indeed it was often the staff that were the main aspect of the program of which YACI participants were aware and the major reason they would stay in touch after the program. Typical comments included:

Make sure you write this down. They bring us in like a family. They [staff] are the two big mothers that we needed.

The teachers here always try to find a way to help you. They don't pamper you, but they don't give up on you. They treat you like an adult.

The teacher is always willing to work with me. The class could be over and she still will work with me till I get it.

The teachers here motivate me. I feel happy because I understand the work here. The teachers give you examples so you can understand.

Several sites made efforts to hire young staff from circumstances and backgrounds similar to those of the participants to serve as role models for YACI participants. An

interviewed YACI participant described the importance of having young staff from the neighborhood:

It helps because they are younger. Programs like this need people in our age range. It is definitely easier to hear it from people your own age. And it helps that they came from here—this neighborhood. They're like us… They've been through the same stuff… hearing it from them is a reassurance that it's true.

Social and Interpersonal Support for Participants

In addition to the education and employment services described above, all five sites included wrap-around services, such as training and support in the social and interpersonal skills needed for success in the workplace and other phases of life. In interviews, all agency and program staff emphasized the number of services and supports that disconnected youth need. One agency director summed it up:

I know I have a very good GED teacher but having a good teacher without having services is not going to bring you success. What will bring you success is having a good teacher with wrap-around services. This population is usually in crisis and is in need of a lot of social services.

A YACI program director also stressed this point in terms of youth attitudes:

The biggest need is "attitudes." How they view themselves in relationship to the world is everything. There is utter lack of self-esteem. Because they think that they're not capable, they sabotage everything—holding down a job becomes impossible. Just teaching them about a resume and cover letter is not enough if they feel like they can't do anything right.

Support services included helping students understand the importance of punctuality, dressing for success, time management, interviewing skills, and goal setting. Both formal and informal interactions were used to deliver these services—i.e., appropriate social skills were taught in classes and reinforced in personal counseling and in daily encounters between participants and staff. As the programs progressed, there was greater emphasis on fostering these soft skills. AED evaluators saw the incidence of this type of training increase over the three years as staff at all five sites realized that support services were necessary adjuncts to the program's education and employment components, given how much support participants needed. Guided by the youth development approach and TA from YDI, these sites crafted social services for the young adults that addressed their disconnectedness and provided the capital for them to approach job hunting and other situations with increased know-how and poise. One agency director stated:

What YACI has done is re-emphasize how critical the personal relationship is to helping young adults become successful.

Most sites offered some type of counseling as well as referrals. In one site, case management became "the basic building block of the programming," with staff carrying a case-load of 30-35 young people, for whom they provided ongoing counseling and regular check-ins regarding attendance and progress towards the GED. In some cases, staff helped YACI participants deal with very difficult issues—as in the case of the young man who needed to move from home where his father, a drug addict, regularly stole whatever money the student had, including his metrocards to get to class. Youth appreciated the efforts of staff to give them skills and attitudes beyond those needed specifically for a job. Two stated:

They taught us everything, they really did. They showed us how to manage our money after we got it. They taught us about budgeting, that was the best part.

For me, the most important part of the whole program was the way that they taught us… like how to act when you get the job. [The job developer] had me working and volunteering in the state department office, they told me how to dress and how to act in the job, and it all paid off.

Youth Experience

The youth development approach encourages program planners to create youth-centered environments where young people feel safe, engage in an array of age-appropriate activities, develop enduring relationships with caring adults, and have a say in their own development. As the quotes from YACI participants throughout this report demonstrate, participants appreciated the program in many ways: the staff, the education, and the job training. They also appreciated the sense of safety and trust, the belief in themselves that the program fostered, and the sense of the world beyond the neighborhood that it provided. Some saw the program a chance to "get out the neighborhood" or "out of the house," as well as a place for second chances and a place to feel good about learning—"to get my education back," as one participant put it—away from the feeling of failure that often characterized their school experiences. Some talked of the "nonjudgmental" atmosphere that allowed them to ask questions and take risks in the classroom and of the role models that the program provided.

According to AED's participant survey, the opinions about the program were more positive at follow-up than at baseline. For example, an overwhelming majority of participants reported that the program helped them a great deal in developing the soft skills that would help them obtain and keep a job, such as being on time and organized, taking directions, and following through:

They really focus here on getting rid of that high school attitude. It's time to stop slacking off and do what I need to do.

I know at this moment in time I'm not ready to get that job because I still act "ghetto," but when I'm ready I know what I have to do to get that job.

Many participants expressed a new sense of the future and a need to keep coming to the program, despite obstacles, because of the new sense of the future—and of what it takes to get there—that the program had provided:

I have no job, no money, I've walked three miles to get here, but I get here because no school would take me. This place accepted me. This is my future and my son's future.

Sometimes I argue with my grandmother. She gets mad that I have to come to school and can't stay with her all the time. But I come anyway.

It can be stressful, because I don't have any money, but I don't let it get in the way of getting my education.

As can be expected with a disconnected population, the experiences of participants, although overwhelmingly positive within the program, did not always lead to instant success. Despite the multilayered supports offered by the program and the gains in educational and employment outcomes for some young adults, other participants continued to struggle as the YDI-funded time for the program drew to a close. In particular:

* Many participants lack basic academic skills and thus still have a way to go before they can pass the GED.

* The lack of work experience, arrests records and/or substance abuse histories still hamper some from keeping or advancing in jobs.

* The exponential advancement of technology during their period of disconnection, combined with their lack of skills in this area, seriously limits their employment potential.

These realities make it imperative that the sites and agencies keep working with and for these individuals, offering follow-up activities and incentives as time goes on. While serving additional disconnected young adults is a laudable goal, this first group that has been assisted on the journey to productive adulthood should continue to be supported in order for them to have the best chance of reaching their goals. Their progress must be tracked to determine the long-range outcomes of the YACI program as well as to document the effectiveness of participating agencies.

CONCLUSION

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This cross-case analysis, grounded in the five individual case studies, has identified patterns and themes that emerged from the three-year evaluation of YACI. Overall, the results show how the program, using a youth development framework, helped disconnected young adults make progress toward education and employment goals while also helping to address some of their social needs. In this way the sites became "one-stop shops" to serve this population filling a gap in communities where services for disconnected youth had been virtually unheard of or limited. Agencies within which the programs were located took on the task of improving their service delivery, education, and employment development activities to make them more responsive to the needs of young adults.

There is evidence that YACI participants now have more realistic, concrete plans for the future and believe them to be attainable. YACI participants grew in self-awareness, as demonstrated by their quotes and survey responses, and became aware of more employment and education options than they would have without such a program, according to the literature on disconnected young adults. As expected, the evaluation did not find significant changes in participants' educational attainment over the six-month period from the baseline to the follow-up survey. This is not surprising: given the severe needs of many participants, it would take a longer time to show such results. However, with the use of the newly instituted MIS at the sites, further analysis of educational outcomes over longer periods of time will be easily accomplished.

Essential elements to the success of the program were the funding and TA offered by YDI—assistance that changed over the course of three years to more closely match the changing needs of the sites. YDI's role in the initiative went beyond the site-based resources and assistance to fulfill several broader goals, such as developing greater awareness in the field and foster inquiry about this population, ultimately to support advocacy for policy and programs to address the needs of disconnected young adults.

YDI's efforts have demonstrated that a strategy of small grants paired with continuous TA can move programs in the right direction for additional funding and sustainability. Since this was a first effort of its kind, these YACI sites have created an array of emerging best practices in this field for community agencies, funders, and policymakers to consider for further funding and research. While significant challenges remain, many of the barriers are potentially surmountable with strategic problem-solving, ongoing TA, and targeted support. Although each site is unique, the model is based on the notion of working across the unique features within many sectors to strengthen the systems of supports for disconnected youth until they become productive adults. Thus at its core, YACI is an

innovative strategy of community-building—an unprecedented opportunity to move a city- and statewide agenda.

The time appears to be ripe for taking on both the opportunities and challenges. It is incumbent on those who affect service and policy in the educational and social arenas to embrace this effort, building awareness and making available the policy, funding, and actions that will assist the YACI model to proliferate.

OTHER YACI REPORTS

Other YACI Reports

Academy for Educational Development (2006). *Young Adult Capacity Initiative: Five Case Studies.* New York, NY.

Academy for Educational Development (2006). *Young Adult Capacity Initiative Longitudinal Study.* New York, NY.

Academy for Educational Development (2005). *Young Adult Capacity Initiative: Second Year Evaluation Report.* New York, NY.

Academy for Educational Development (2005). *Young Adult Capacity Initiative Evaluation: Findings of the 2004 Young Adult Survey.* New York, NY.

Academy for Educational Development (2005). *Young Adult Capacity Initiative: First Year Evaluation Report.* New York, NY.

Fund for the City of New York Youth Development Institute

The Fund for the City of New York was established by the Ford Foundation in 1968 with the mandate to improve the quality of life for all New Yorkers. For nearly four decades, in partnership with government agencies, nonprofit institutions, and foundations, the Fund has developed and helped implement innovations in policy, programs, practices, and technology to advance the functioning of government and nonprofit organizations in New York City and beyond.

The Fund seeks out, adapts, applies, and assesses ways to enable government and nonprofit agencies to achieve excellence through its core programs — bridge loans, grants, incubation, and management and technology assistance, as well as through four strategic initiatives: the Center on Municipal Government Performance, the Youth Development Institute, the Center for Internet Innovation /E-Community Connect, and the Center for Nonprofit Enterprise Solutions.

As one of the Fund's strategic initiatives, the Youth Development Institute (YDI) works in New York City and nationally to build youth development policies, programs, and practices. Through its work, YDI seeks to bring together families, schools, and communities to create caring, engaging, and challenging environments in which young people work as partners with adults.

At the core of YDI's work is a vision of youth as central actors in their own lives, rather than as passive clients of services. Youth development is defined as an ongoing process in which all young people are engaged and invested and through which young people seek ways to meet their physical and social needs and build the competencies and connections they perceive as necessary for survival and success. YDI's research-based youth development framework identifies the type of experiences present when young people achieve successful adulthood. These include close relationships with caring adults, high expectations, engaging activities, opportunities for participation in decision making and activities affecting others, and continuity of support. This framework has been the basis of all YDI programs since its establishment in 1991.

For more information about the Fund for the City of New York Youth Development Institute, visit www.fcny.org.

Academy for Educational Development

The Academy for Educational Development (AED) is an independent, nonprofit organization committed to addressing human development needs in the United States and throughout the world. As one of the world's foremost human and social development organizations, AED works in six major program areas: U.S. Education and Workforce Development; Global Learning; Global Health, Population and Nutrition; Leadership and Institutional Development; and Social Change. At the heart of all our programs is an emphasis on building skills and knowledge to improve people's lives.

The AED **Center for School and Community Services** is part of AED's U.S. Education and Workforce Development Group. The Center uses multidisciplinary approaches to address critical issues in education, health, and youth development. To achieve its goals, the Center provides technical assistance to strengthen schools, school districts, and community-based organizations. It conducts evaluations of school and community programs while striving to provide the skills and impetus for practitioners to undertake ongoing assessment and improvement. The Center also manages large-scale initiatives to strengthen practitioner networks and accelerate systems change and uses the knowledge gained from this work to advocate for effective policies and practices and disseminate information through publications, presentations, and on the World Wide Web. In the past 27 years, the Center has undertaken over 125 evaluation, technical assistance, and dissemination projects in 90 cities and 40 states.

In 2005, the Educational Equity Center at AED (EEC) was formed. EEC's mission is to provide equality of opportunity on a national scale in schools and afterschool settings, starting in early childhood. EEC is an outgrowth of Educational Equity Concepts, a national nonprofit organization with a 22-year history of addressing educational excellence for all children regardless of gender, race/ethnicity, disability, or level of family income. EEC seeks to ensure that equity is a key focus within national reform efforts, eliminating inequities that often limit student potential.

AED is headquartered in Washington, DC, and has offices in 167 countries and cities around the world and throughout the United States. The Center for School and Community Services is located primarily in AED's office in New York City. For more information about the Center's work, go to the Center's website at www.aed.org/scs or contact Patrick Montesano or Alexandra Weinbaum, co-directors, at 212-243-1110, or e-mail sweinbau or pmontesa@aed.org.

Principal Offices

1825 Connecticut Avenue, Washington, DC 20009-5721 | Tel: 202-884-8000 | www.aed.org

100 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10011 | Tel: 212-243-1110 | www.aed.org/scs