

Effects of YMCA High School Youth
Institute on School Grades and
Attendance
Academic Years 2002 - 2006

Sandy L. Kirkner, M.A.-R.
Research Associate

Julie O'Donnell, Ph.D., M.S.W.
Professor and Director of Research

California State University, Long Beach
Department of Social Work
Child Welfare Training Centre
(562) 985-7372

March, 2008

Introduction

The YMCA of Greater Long Beach Youth Institute is an innovative program that uses technology and service learning as an integral mechanism for promoting positive youth development and enhancing the academic success and career readiness of low-income, culturally-diverse high school students. Classes enter each summer with an intensive eight-week program. Upon graduation from the summer program, participants become “Youth Institute Alumni,” who are then able to voluntarily participate in a wide range of year-round programs throughout their high school and, potentially, their college years. Involvement opportunities include, but are not limited to, digital art labs, homework assistance, academic advising, community service, equipment check-out, field trips, dance clubs, paid technology and mentoring assignments, community leadership positions and social work support. The program has been in operation since June, 2001.

Methods

Data Collection

In order to be included in the grade evaluation, both the student and their parent signed an informed consent form allowing researchers to collect their grades from the school district. Youth Institute participants’ grades were collected from the Long Beach Unified School District using only school district identification numbers. Research staff from LBUSD then randomly selected a comparison sample of high school students who were matched to the Youth Institute sample based on gender, ethnicity and year in school. Five comparison students were matched for each Youth Institute participant, some (N = 10), however, did not have useable data and were excluded from the analysis. The district provided semester grade point average (GPA), the cumulative GPA, and the absences at

various time points. The pretest measures varied for each participant depending on when they joined the Youth Institute. The specific measures used in these analyses were taken from the semester directly prior to entry into the Youth Institute and at the end of the next year or two depending on the length of time the participant had been involved in the Youth Institute.

Sample

Forty-one (23%) of the 181 Youth Institute students who started the program from 2002 to 2006, had both parent and child informed consents, and useable data for this analysis. It should be noted that consent was voluntary and, since the methods of gaining consent varied, not all of the years have equal representation in the data. In fact, 79% of those included in these analyses entered the program in June, 2006. However, attrition analyses compared those in this sample to those lost to grade date collection to determine whether the two groups were different. There were no gender or ethnic differences between the two groups suggesting that the findings here are may be generalized to the larger group of Youth Institute participants. Table 1 displays the demographic characteristics of the Youth Institute sample (N = 41) and the comparison sample (N = 195). There were no significant gender or ethnic differences between the two groups.

Table 1
Demographics of YMCA Youth Institute Participants and Comparison Students
Academic Years 2001 – 2006

	YMCA High School Youth Institute Participants		Comparison Students	
	(N = 41)		(N = 195)	
	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>
◆ Gender				
Male	46%	19	50%	97
Female	54%	22	50%	98
◆ Ethnicity				
Latino	46%	19	44%	86
African-American	22%	9	32%	63
Asian-American/Pacific Islander	32%	13	24%	46

Analyses

Multivariate analysis of co-variance (MANCOVA) was used to compare outcome differences between Youth Institute and comparison students on last semester grade point average, cumulative grade point average, and absences, while controlling for baseline measures.

Comparison between Youth Institute and Comparison Students on Semester G.P.A., Cumulative G.P.A. and Absences

As shown in Table 2, YMCA Youth Institute students had significantly higher cumulative GPAs, $F(1, 221) = 7.81, p \leq .05$, and significantly fewer absences, $F(1, 225) = 4.22, p \leq .05$, than comparison high school students after intervention. .

Table 2
Comparisons of Grades and Absences between Youth Institute Participants and
Comparison Students

Measure	Youth Institute Participants		Comparison Students		F-Value
	Adjusted Mean	N	Adjusted Mean	N	
Semester GPA.	2.37	41	2.42	184	.08
Cumulative GPA	2.78	41	2.37	183	7.81**
Absences	3.97	41	6.46	187	4.22**

**p < .05

Conclusions

One of the primary goals of the YMCA Youth Institute is to help promote better academic success for low-income, culturally-diverse youth. In this current study, Youth Institute participants were compared with a random, matched comparison group of high school students to determine the effects of the Youth Institute on school grades and attendance. Youth Institute participants had significantly higher cumulative GPAs than matched, comparison high school students after intervention. The fact that there was no difference between the two groups in cumulative GPA prior to intervention strongly suggests that involvement in the Youth Institute was related to higher grades, or at least, less of a drop in grades than those experienced by comparison students. This is true even though there was not a significant difference between the two groups on the final semester GPA used in these analyses. Thus, the findings here, in keeping with the literature on similar programs, suggests that well-designed community technology programs, like the Youth Institute, that integrate positive youth development strategies may prove to be a

successful way of helping youth to perform better in school (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; McIntosh & White, 2006; Goerge, Cusick, Wasserman, & Gladden, 2007; Ruppert & Smith, 1996).

Youth Institute participants also had evidenced significantly fewer absences after intervention than comparison students. On average, they attended two and a half more days during the last semester than comparison studies after intervention. Thus, it appears that the involvement in the Youth Institute contributed to these youth attending school more frequently than their matched peers. This outcome is important given that level of school attendance, particularly during the ninth grade, is a predictor of on-time high school graduation (Allensworth & Easton, 2007) and since school attendance has been linked both to academic achievement (Roby, 2004; DeKalb, 1999; Shutt, 2000) and a decreased risk of school dropout (National Education Goals Panel, 1994).

The findings of higher grades and attendance may be particularly salient as just over half (51%) of the Youth Institute students had their baseline grades and attendance taken from their last semester of middle school and their ending measures after their first year of high school. Research suggests that youth seem to be particularly vulnerable to negative risks such as lower grades and more attendance problems during the transition between middle school and high school (Alspaugh, 2001; Smith, 2006). It is quite possible that Youth Institute involvement may have helped participants to negotiate the transition from middle school to high school more effectively than their peers. This suggests that efforts to engage youth in the Youth Institute prior to actual entry into high school may help provide them with valuable supports as they grow, develop and take on the added challenges high school.

Overall, these findings are extremely encouraging and suggest that involvement in the Youth Institute is linked to both better school attendance and performance. It will be interesting to see if these outcomes persist as more youth are included in future grade analyses.

References

Allensworth, E. M., & Easton, J. C. (July, 2007). What matters for staying on-track and graduating in Chicago public high schools. Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago.

Alsbaugh, J. W. (2001). Achievement loss associated with the transition to middle school and high school. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 92(1), 20-25.

DeKalb, J. (1999). Student truancy. Eugene, OR: ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, ED429334.

Durlak, J. A., & Weissburg, R. P. (2007). The impact of after-school programs that promote personal and social skills. Chicago, IL: Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning. Retrieved on February 19, 2008 from: www.casel.org.

Goerge, R., Cusick, G. R., Wasserman, M., & Gladden, R. M. (2007). After-school programs and academic impact: A study of Chicago's after school matters. Chapin Hill Center for Children, 112. Retrieved on February 19, 2008, from www.chapinhall.org.

McIntosh, J., & White, S. H. (2006). Building for freshman success: High schools working as professional learning communities. *American Secondary Education*, 34 (2), 40-49.

National Education Goals Panel (1994). *The National Education Goals Report: Building a Nation of Learners*. Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Roby, D. E. (2004). Research on school attendance and student achievement: A study of Ohio schools. *Educational Research Quarterly* 28(1), 3 – 16.

Ruppert, N. B., & Smith, M. J. (1996). Ensuring success for at-risk students at the high school. U.S. Department of Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED394939).

Shutt, T. R. (2000). The relationship between absenteeism and academic achievement in Metropolitan Tennessee. Tennessee State University.

Smith, J. S. (2006). Examining the long-term impact of achievement loss during the transition to high school. *The Journal of Secondary Gifted Education*, 17(4), 211-221.