

# **Quantitative Evaluation of the Long-Term Effects of the YMCA High School Youth Institute**

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## **Introduction**

The YMCA of Greater Long Beach Youth Institute (YI) is a program that uses technology 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. The program has been in operation since 2001. 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, even college years. Involvement opportunities include digital art labs, academic advising, homework assistance, personal/home advising, community service, equipment check-out, trips, paid technology and mentoring internships, community leadership positions, and social work support. Youth might also have the opportunity to work with Change Agent Productions (CAP), a social enterprise comprised of YMCA professional digital media artists who work alongside urban youth to carry out professional video productions, graphic design projects and digital media trainings. Many young adults remain involved in the YI or YMCA as CAP, summer and after-school staff and, recently, the program held a weekend retreat for young adults (both those in college and the workforce), and hope to continue these opportunities and supports in the future. Some alumni also are involved in YMCA fundraising efforts and a large group recently met for months to plan the Youth Institute Ten-Year Anniversary Dinner.

The long-term goals of the Youth Institute are to: (1) improve academic achievement and stimulate interest in higher education among low-income, culturally-diverse, urban high school youth; (2) improve the technology, career, leadership and decision-making skills of these youth to promote readiness for higher education or career entry after graduation; and (3) promote

bonding to pro-social adults and community attachment among urban youth to ensure that they remain engaged in their schools and communities. This report investigates the effects of the program on the transition from high school to higher education and the workforce from the perspective of young adults who participated in the program.

## **Methods**

### ***Data Collection***

Data for the study was collected using a self-administered survey developed specifically for this study. Surveys were either completed on-line, using SurveyMonkey, or at the end of focus groups that were held to gather qualitative data on the program. Participants were recruited for the study in multiple ways. First, YMCA staff consolidated available e-mail addresses and telephone numbers for alumni over the age of 18 who had graduated from college. Second, YMCA staff announced the study and distributed focus group sign-up sheets with contact information at meetings attended by older alumni. Third, YMCA staff posted information on the study on Facebook with the researcher's contact information. After receiving the contact information, research staff sent e-mail invitations and/or made telephone calls to invite alumni to participate in focus groups. If potential participants were unable to attend the focus groups, for example, they did not live in the area, a link to the on-line survey was sent to them. Once the research team had attempted to contact the person three times without a response, the on-line survey link was sent. In order to encourage participation in the study, those who attended the focus groups and completed the survey were given a \$10 gas card while those who completed the on-line survey and voluntarily provided their e-mail address were entered into a raffle for one of four \$25 Target gift cards. The study was approved by the California State University, Long Beach, Institutional Review Board.

### *Sample*

YMCA staff provided researchers with some type of contact information on 102 (36%) of the approximately 282 alumni who were eligible to participate (over the age of 18 and a high school graduate). Ten (10%) of those names provided did not have useable e-mail and/or telephone contact information. Only 17 (89%) answered enough questions on the on-line survey to be included in the study. Thus, 51 (50%) of those with contact information are actually included in the study. Chi-square analyses were conducted to determine if there were any significant differences between the YI alumni who participated in the study versus those that did not in terms of gender and ethnicity.

There were significant gender and ethnic differences between the two groups. The study sample had a higher proportion of males (67% versus 42%) than the non-participant group. Also, the LTE survey participants had a higher proportion of Latinos (64% versus 50%), and Asian-American/Pacific Islanders (29% versus 12%), and a lower proportion of African-Americans (7% versus 37%), than the group who did not participate in the survey. This indicates that the findings reported here are likely to be more generalizable to males than females and to Latinos and Asian-American/Pacific Islanders than African-Americans. The contact information was also more likely available on young adults who continued to have some involvement in the program, thus, these findings might not be generalizable to the larger population of young adult alumni.

As shown in Table 1, the majority (67%) completed the surveys after the focus groups. Thirty-three (65%) were male. About half (49%) were Latino, and Asian-American/Pacific Islanders was the second largest ethnic group (27%). The ages ranged from 18 (19%) to 25 (12%). The average age was 21 years. While there were representatives from each of the classes, the largest proportion of participants came from 2001 and 2008 (15% from each).

Table 1  
Demographics  
(N = 51)

	%	N
Type of Participation		
Focus Group	67%	34
On-line Survey	33%	17
Gender		
Male	65%	33
Female	35%	18
Ethnicity		
Latino	49%	25
Asian American/Pacific Islander	27%	14
Bi/Multicultural	14%	7
African-American	6%	3
European-American	4%	2
Age		
18	19%	10
19	10%	5
20	17%	9
21	8%	4
22	8%	4
23	12%	6
24	14%	7
25	12%	6
Youth Institute Class Year		
2001	15%	8
2002	10%	5
2003	14%	7
2004	12%	6
2005	10%	5
2006	12%	6
2007	6%	3
2008	15%	8
2009	6%	3

### ***Instrument***

The survey explored numerous areas. The first section investigated the self-perceived effects of YI participation on skill development and attitudes. Most of the items represented areas hypothesized by the model to be influenced by participation, and participants rated items from a prescribed list, most based on findings from earlier, short-term studies on the program. The skills and attitudes included interpersonal skills, leadership skills, technology skills, cultural competence, community involvement, and attitudes toward education. Items were rated on a scale ranging from 1 “Strongly Disagree,” to 4 “Strongly Agree.” Higher scores meant higher levels of skill development.

The second section examined participant perceptions of how beneficial they found each of the components of the YI. Sixteen different aspects of the program were identified. The response categories were 1 “Not Beneficial,” 2 “Slightly Beneficial,” 3 “Somewhat Beneficial,” and 4 “Very Beneficial.” Since not all of the components were available during each year, participants had the ability to reply “Not Applicable.” Higher scores indicated greater benefit.

The third section explored the ways in which participants were still involved in the YI or YMCA. Participants were asked to check each of the ways they were involved from a list of possibilities (e.g., stay in touch with YI staff, attend YMCA/YI, employed by YMCA/YI). The fourth section asked whether participants currently worked, or had worked, for the YMCA. If they responded “yes,” they were then asked in what capacity.

The next section investigated the effects of YI participation on higher education. Participants were asked whether they were in or had graduated from some type of higher educational institution and, if they had, their major. Next, they were asked if YI participation

had helped them to make decisions about higher education, and, if it did, an open-ended question gathered information on the ways it did.

The next section examined employment including whether or not each participant was employed and the type of employment, as well as the ways in which the YI contributed to career choice decisions. The final two open-ended questions asked the ways in which the skills they developed during the YI helped in what they were now doing in their lives, and suggestions for program improvement.

### ***Analysis***

Frequencies and descriptive statistics were used to describe the sample and the responses to the closed-ended questions. Cronbach's alpha was used to ensure the internal reliability of the scales. Content analysis was used to analyze the open-ended responses which were independently coded by two members of the research team. Independent t-tests were used to explore gender and survey response (focus group or on-line) differences on skills and attitudes.

## **Results**

### ***Effects of YI Participation on Skills and Attitudes***

As shown below in Table 2, the young adult alumni reported that YI participation most helped them to develop skills in working with groups, using digital video, movie-making, promoted confidence in their ability to learn, community involvement skills, Internet skills, leadership skills, and interpersonal skills. Although the lowest rated skills were written communication skills, data processing skills, web design, word processing and planning skills, all, on average, were rated between "agree" and "strongly agree."

Table 2  
Skill Development and Attitude Changes Reported By Young Adult YI Alumni  
(N = 51)

Participation in the YI helped me to develop:	Mean	SD
Skills Working with Groups	3.88	.33
Skills Using Digital Video Equipment	3.82	.56
Movie-Making Skills	3.78	.54
Confidence in My Abilities to Learn	3.75	.48
Community Involvement Skills	3.73	.49
Internet Skills	3.73	.63
Leadership Skills	3.71	.50
Interpersonal Skills	3.71	.50
Cultural Competence Skills	3.69	.51
Presentation Skills	3.67	.59
Decision-Making Skills	3.67	.48
Graphic Design Skills	3.65	.69
Commitment to Education	3.59	.61
Motivation to do Well in School	3.59	.54
Problem-Solving Skills	3.53	.58
Planning Skills	3.45	.54
Word Processing Skills	3.45	.76
Web Design Skills	3.41	.80
Data Processing Skills	3.31	.76
Written Communication Skills	3.27	.75

In order to determine the long-term impact of the YI on key program outcomes (leadership skills, technology skills, educational attitudes), three scales were made from the items above. The leadership skills measure was created using the mean of ten items and the alpha reliability was .84. Items included, “decision-making skills, “cultural competence skills,”

and “interpersonal skills.” The technology scale was the mean of seven items and the alpha reliability was .84. Items included, “movie-making skills,” “graphic design skills,” and “web design.” The educational attitudes scale was created using the mean of three items and the alpha reliability was .70. Items included, “commitment to education,” and “confidence in ability to learn.” As shown below in Table 3, the means on three scales were very close, however, leadership skills and educational attitudes was slightly higher than technology skills. There were no significant differences between males and females on any of the scales, however, those who completed the surveys as part of the focus groups reported a significantly greater impact than their “on-line” counterparts on leadership skills,  $t(49) = 2.32, p < .05$ .

Table 3  
Changes in Key Project Constructs Reported By Young Adult YI Alumni  
(N = 51)

Participation in the YI helped me to develop:	Mean	SD
Educational Attitudes	3.64	.43
Leadership Skills	3.63	.34
Technology Skills	3.59	.49

### *Perceptions of YI Components*

As shown in Table 4, the program components rated most beneficial were the wilderness retreat, the digital arts lab, relationships with peers and YI staff and the intensive summer program. Although educational career advising and year-round academic advising were the lowest rated items, on average, they were still rated between “somewhat” and “very” beneficial.

Table 4  
Most Beneficial YI Components as Ranked by Young Adult YI Alumni  
(N = 51)

YI Component	Mean	SD
Wilderness Retreat	3.96	.20
Digital Arts Lab	3.92	.27
Relationships with Peers	3.84	.46
Relationships with YI Staff	3.76	.76
Intensive Summer Program	3.75	.74
Technology Training	3.69	.68
Financial Stipends or Pay	3.69	.84
Community Involvement/Volunteer Work	3.67	.74
Trips	3.65	.98
Learning about other Cultures and Ethnicities	3.61	.83
Community Leadership Opportunities	3.53	.97
Alumni Program	3.53	1.08
Staff Support for Personal Challenges	3.47	1.08
Job Opportunities with Change Agent Productions (CAP)	3.35	1.41
Year-Round Academic Advising	3.22	1.19
Educational Career Advising from Staff	3.16	1.30

### *Types of Involvement with YI/YMCA*

As shown in Table 5, these young adults continued to be involved in the YI/YMCA in multiple ways. In fact, 80% of the young adults were involved in more than one way. The primary ways in which they were involved were that they stayed in touch with YI staff or friends (78% each), followed by volunteering for the YMCA/YI (63%) or attending events (61%). Only six (12%) reported no real contact. Participants also said they “visited every now or then,”

“campaigned and promoted,” and that “the people you bond with become family so, even if you only see them once in a while, we still care about each other—makes you stay around.”

Table 5  
Ways Young Adult YI Alumni Stay Involved at the YI or YMCA  
(N = 51)

Stay Involved by:	%	Frequency
Stay in Touch with YI Staff	78%	40
Stay in Touch with YI Friends	78%	40
Volunteer for YMCA/YI	63%	32
Attend YMCA/YI Events	61%	31
Use Digital Arts Lab	53%	27
Work for YMCA/YI	51%	26
No Real Contact	12%	6
Other	6%	3

As shown in Table 6, 35 (69%) participants said they were currently or had been employed by the YMCA. They were most likely to have been employed as after-school program staff (74%) or High School YI Summer staff (71%).

Table 6  
Jobs of Alumni Who Were Currently or Had Been Employed by YMCA  
(N = 35)

Work as:	%	Frequency
After-School Program Staff	74%	26
High School YI Summer Staff	71%	25
Change Agent Productions Staff	34%	12
High School YI Year-Round Staff	29%	10
College Arts Program Staff	14%	5
Middle School YI Staff	9%	3
University Art Museum Staff	3%	1

### ***YI Participation and Education***

Thirty-nine (76%) participants were currently enrolled in or had graduated from college. Participants primarily attended community college (31%) or a university (29%) but three (6%) had attended both. Two (4%) were taking on-line courses while one (2%) had attended a technical or art school. These young adults were in a variety of majors with six (15%) reporting dual majors. As shown in Table 7, the most frequent majors were in digital media arts (photography, film, graphic design, music production) and social work or social sciences (child development, communication, criminal justice). Single participants were majoring in journalism, massage therapy/paralegal, Spanish, criminal law, and mortuary science.

Table 7  
College Majors  
(N = 39)

	%	N
Major		
Digital Media Arts	18%	7
Social Work/Social Sciences	18%	7
Computer Sciences	13%	5
Medical Sciences	13%	5
Business	8%	3
Engineering	8%	3
Other	26%	10

Thirty-eight (97%) of those who were or had been in college said that the YI had helped them to make decisions about higher education. Thirty-seven participants shared how the YI had helped them, with many noting multiple ways; as one said, “I was highly influenced by the staff, moral support, as well as applications, scholarships, etc. They also suggested schools and career paths to follow.” As shown in Table 8, the most frequently identified way the YI helped was by providing support and motivation for higher education (32%). This was noted as important particularly among those who were the first in their family to attend college. It is worth noting that, although staff was most often acknowledged for their support and motivation, a couple said they were motivated by their peers as well.

The YI was extremely supportive of me going to college.

Well, I was actually planning to attend LBCC even though I got accepted into CSULB. I didn't feel that I was ready to go to a university. Once I shared my opinions with the YI staff, they told me that I should go to CSULB and all the positive things about it. I was not convinced, but since I went to the YI after school, every single day I would get the staff telling me that I would be making a

mistake by not taking the challenge. They really showed they cared. After hearing so much from them, I made up my mind and am now attending CSULB.

No one in my family had graduated, so having staff that had been through it really helped out a lot

Former students have their college banners hanging in the digital arts lab, it motivated me to succeed and put a banner of my own.

They encouraged me to apply to a university, then to go to a community college and transfer. They motivated me to achieve more than my own parents.

They gave me the opportunity to continue learning even though I was taking a year off from college due to financial and personal problems at home by letting me intern for almost a year.

Thirty percent of the participants made comments suggesting that YI participation had helped them to see the value of a higher education and how it could improve their future.

YI staff really encourages kids to stay in school and better our lives for the future.

Encouraged the idea of going to college instead of just getting a minimum wage job.

It just made me realize how important it was to attain a good education to better my life.

They introduced me to the reality that the higher my education is, the more edge I will have over other individuals who are trying to obtain the same job that I am. They may pick me to fulfill a job spot because I have a degree and my competition does not.

Another 30% of the participants reported that YI participation had helped them to decide on their career path.

By trying to get a career either in filming or in computer-related programming as in movie editing, Photoshop, and web design.

Trying to further myself in community involvement skills. Main reason why I'll minor in sociology.

They also give you so many ways to be successful through college computer and filming programs, community service, and the will to go above and beyond what you ever imagined you would be able to accomplish which includes college.

They changed how I felt about what major I wanted to be in and the career I wanted to pursue.

The technology process helped me to open up to many opportunities regarding my major.

Seven (19%) suggested that the YI had helped them to complete the paperwork related to college attendance.

They helped me apply to the college of my choice and to apply for FAFSA.

They encouraged me by helping me apply to school, financial aid, scholarships, and recommendation letters.

A few participants indicated that the YI helped them to make decisions about higher education because it provided them opportunities like field trips or access to opportunities to learn about higher education. As one said, “The Y encourages people to obtain a higher education throughout the year by field trips to schools, talking about higher education will benefit someone in the long run.” A couple also noted that the YI had helped them to develop confidence in their ability to pursue a higher education, for example, “It made me aware of my own learning capabilities. Also, the staff of my year were all college educated. This made me realize that more opportunities are available to you when you have a degree and that you can, in turn, create opportunities for others.” Individual respondents noted that the YI had taught them to work hard, provided them with financial support to pay for tests, or that they regretted not taking advantage of what the YI offered in terms of higher educational support.

Table 8  
Ways YI Participation Helped Make Decisions about Higher Education  
(N = 37\*)

	%	N
Support and Motivate	32%	12
Instill Value of Higher Education	30%	11
Help Identify Career Path	30%	11
Assist with Applications	19%	7
Provide Opportunities/Field Trips	11%	4
Instill Confidence in Abilities	5%	2
Other	8%	3

\*Multiple responses possible

### ***YI Participation and Employment***

Thirty-six (71%) of these young adults were employed in some capacity. Of those, 56% (N = 20) were employed part-time. Seventeen (47%) worked for the YMCA in some capacity, primarily in after-school programs or for the YI or Change Agent Productions. Six (17%) were employed in retail, food service or in an office environment, while four (11%) worked in the computer/technology field. Three (8%) were in the U. S. Army, while three (8%) others were hired in social service positions (case manager for homeless families, Family Injury Prevention Coordinator, mentor). The remaining participants had a range of jobs including emergency medical technician, spa director/massage therapist, intern in a communications firm, and a fiscal coordinator at a university women's resource center.

Thirty-nine (76%) participants thought the YI had helped them to make decisions about their career choices. As shown below in Table 9, the major way in which the YI helped these young adults was related to introducing them to career options. Most said the YI helped them to develop an interest in the social/human services (working with children or communities, social

work, youth development) (N = 13) or technology (computers, film, graphic design) (N = 12).

Two (5%) reported YI involvement got them interested in the arts, for example, “it made me go into the arts.”

I see myself not as a person who wants to have one career, but being involved with the YI made me interested in and have a passion for working with people in a school or my community.

I would like to become a social worker. All my work experience has been geared toward inner-city youth who have come through hardships. I would like to give back.

I reflected on the experiences that contributed to my being in college and noticed that a number of community development programs supported me throughout my K-12 years. The YI was at the top of the programs I identified as supportive. It also sparked my interest in being involved with my community and in being involved in similar programs.

When I did my community service hours at the Y, I worked showing kids technology. In the summer, I taught high school kids technology. Then, I was positive I wanted to teach kids technology as a career. But Bob offered me a job as a program leader at a middle school. I learned that I did not want to teach them technology, I wanted to help them through their hard times. I found myself working with a lot of foster children. There wasn't much I could do and I felt bad. I would make sure to be an ear for them and talk to them about their problems. I actually learned from the YI that we might be technology instructors; but we must first be there to help the kids emotionally and be there for them when they need the help. That's why I want to be a social worker.

It was a push toward more film and digital arts.

They gave me insight about the real world of how graphic design is carried out, and how I can make it better.

It got me interested in web and graphic design

About a third of the responses suggested that the YI provided role models, support and/or opportunities that gave them the ability to explore different careers or to better understand their own talents and preferences related to work. As one said, “For a long time I didn't know what I wanted to do. They really help open doors and give opportunities to figure out what interests you.”

It helped me want to actually want to get a job. To tell the truth, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do but it pushed me to get out and look for something in the area of law enforcement. It's hard to explain in words but I wouldn't be the person that I am today without the guidance from Bob Cabeza and the staff of the Institute. You really have to go through the program to understand.

A staff member in middle school with the Y encouraged me to pursue computers when I still did not realize my passion for it.

Bob and Julie helped me decide to go into social work and were so supportive when I decided to apply to the major.

I talked to people, took presentations into consideration, noticed what my strengths were and decided to put them into a major.

I am going to be the next Bob and Les of the YI program.

Table 9  
Ways YI Participation Helped Make Decisions about Careers  
(N = 37)\*

	%	N
Introduced Career Options	89%	33
Social/Human Services	39%	13
Technology	36%	12
Arts	5%	2
Provided Role Models/Supports	30%	11

\*Multiple responses possible

### ***Ways in Which Skills Learned in YI Contributes to Life Now or Future Plans***

Participants were then asked, via an open-ended question, how the skills they learned at the YI contributed to what they were doing with their life now or for what they wanted to do in the future. Forty-seven (92%) participants responded to this question. The majority noted gaining multiple skills, for example, "It helps with teamwork effort, communication skills, leadership skills, and computer digital media skills that I use on a daily basis."

As shown in Table 10, the most frequently mentioned skills (40%) seen as contributing to participants' lives were technology skills (computer, digital arts, film, web design, photography, music production).

I still plan on working with computers. I try and still use the skills received from filming, photography and video editing.

I am able to do projects for school that would be much harder without the Y. Also, small projects that I do to pass time also came from the Y, like GarageBand and iMovie.

The YI really helped me with knowledge of digital media. Now I make my own invites. I also do marketing at my job so it helps me make flyers and send out nice mass emails.

The YI taught me how to web design and use programs, such as Adobe Photoshop, Illustrator and Cinema4D.

About one-third (30%) of the participants indicated that they had learned interpersonal skills (communication, working well with others, social skills, etc.) through their YI involvement. Leadership skills which, of course, are closely related to interpersonal skills were also noted by 25% of the participants.

Most important are my listening and communication skills, which are always needed in everyday life.

The skills I learned helped me in my life because they helped me become a more social person, a better public speaker, and communicator with different types of people. It helped break through language barriers.

I'm interested in creating more social skills. I'm currently volunteering with various organizations. The people skills are important when dealing with unique personalities.

Know that I have to step up and be a leader to get somewhere, to work productively with others

They help me lead not only at work but in class and other phases of life. They also have driven me to get a degree.

The wilderness groups and team building activities helped me to understand the basic skills of teamwork and leadership which are essential.

What helped me most were the communication and leadership skills that I attained while I worked with the YI

Responses from nine (19%) participants indicated that the skills they learned were directly contributing to their employment or volunteer positions.

They gave me the knowledge base on how to use arts programs. I support myself financially doing freelance work

It trained me to become a better leader. I have a job at a school site and the technology skills I learned helped me through my years in college.

Volunteer service as well as computer knowledge looks great on my resume for potential employers.

This program has impacted me as I learned digital arts skills, leadership skills - just people skills in general. The skills learned will allow me to better serve the youth I plan to help in the future.

Eight (17%) participants shared that the YI had contributed to their own personal growth and development such as becoming a better person or believing in their own self-worth and abilities.

I was able to find myself throughout the time in the program, talk to people, gain confidence and stopped thinking of myself as less than I was. I was given the strength and confidence to follow my dreams.

The YI contributed to my life by providing me with the confidence and inspiration to always want to do better and become a better person for my friends, family, and myself. I now have every tool I need to succeed.

The YI helped me see the potential I have to learn new things, and assured me that whatever I set my mind to I can achieve.

A smaller number (11%) of these young adults indicated their appreciation for the support they received from the YI and recognized how it still contributed to their lives today. Comments included, "The YI contributed to my life by always being there for me," and

“provided me with friends that keep me focused on my goals.” A few comments reflected that the participants had learned skills that would help them work with diverse populations or to become more culturally competent.

Through the YI, I learned to work and collaborate with a diverse population. This experience taught me skills to help me be culturally competent and sensitive.

I would like to help families and youth by exposing them to different cultures and new places in life to expand their knowledge and educate them to become wiser and better individuals to make this world a better place.

Three (6%) thought the program had also helped them in their academic pursuits, for example, “It got me three scholarships all worth \$2,000. I was motivated by them to do better and dedicate myself to pure excellence and improvement.”

Table 10  
Ways YI Skills Have Contributed to Their Lives Today and in the Future  
(N = 47\*)

	%	N
Technology Skills	40%	19
Interpersonal Skills	34%	16
Leadership Skills	25%	12
Employment/Volunteer Skills	19%	9
Self-Improvement	17%	8
Personal Support	11%	5
Cultural Competence	8%	4
Academic Support	6%	3

\*Multiple responses possible

### ***Suggestions for YI Program Improvement***

Forty-five (88%) participants responded to the question regarding suggestions for program improvement. Of those, eight (18%) said the program did not need to improve, for

example, “program is perfect.” As shown in Table 11, the most frequent suggestions for improvement were to serve more youth (N = 10) or to improve and to provide more trips and events for participants (N = 9).

Expand to other places internationally and abroad; opening up the doors for more growth. There are more places, I am sure, that youth will benefit from the teaching and guidance of the staff, leaders, and alumni of the Youth Institute. It wouldn't hurt to give opportunities to help other youth succeed from the streets to corporate America. That sounds like a success story to me.

Accept more kids to empower them about technology and life skills.

Provide more trips both during the summer program and the rest of year.

More social gatherings.

About 18% of the young adults made comments regarding the need for a bigger, better facility. Comments included, “YI can be improved by having our own, bigger place. A bigger facility equals more staff serving more youth,” and “The only thing that I can say would be to get a bigger place because there are always so many kids that the whole YMCA is always packed.”

Seven (16%) mentioned suggestions related to staff, three of whom thought there needed to be more staff. The remaining suggestions, although different, all seemed to indicate a need for a different type of staff or staff focus and to encourage staff passion.

Have staff who play different roles in the development of a teen. For example, there could be different staff who get more involved in the life of a child. Be able to be more welcoming.

Bring back staff to teach digital media arts, create a music tutor for those who would like to learn to play music, better staff, and a business person to understand what's behind the YI.

Have the staff be more consistent, older and experienced. When the staff was clearly older and more qualified, it seemed to be more effective. Including young staff is alright, but older staff make the kids buy in more from a respect standpoint.

Six (13%) participants suggested providing more financial support for youth. The financial support fell into two primary areas; scholarships (N = 3) and jobs and internships (N = 3). Comments included, “more scholarships for students or career opportunities for participants who are struggling to find a job,” and “more internships.” Four (9%) participants expressed the desire for a college alumni program or improved communication with college-age alumni. Comments included, “More communication with the college alumni, a massive text with information, maybe a class reunion,” and “coordinator for college students.” Three (7%) indicated the need to seek more funding for the program. Individual participants also made suggestions about having a mentoring/academic tutoring center, ensuring up-to-date technology and software, providing youth with more help with critical thinking skills since the program can be really hard and stressful, teaching resume writing skills, and a couple (4%) also suggested providing transportation for youth involved in the YI.

Table 11  
 Suggestions for YI Improvement  
 (N = 45)\*

	%	N
Serve More Youth/Replicate Program	22%	10
Provide More Trips/Events	20%	9
Expand/Improve Facility	18%	8
None Needed	18%	8
Provide Financial Support for Youth	13%	6
Start Program for College-Age Youth	9%	4
Obtain More Funding	7%	3
Other	13%	5

\*Multiple responses possible

## Discussion

This study explored the long-term effects of the YI using a self-report survey on a sample of 51 young adults who had participated in the program. Again, it should be noted that since the contact information was more than likely available on young adults who continued to have some involvement in the YI or those who followed the YI program on Facebook, these findings might not be generalizable to the larger population of young YI adult alumni. The results here do provide support for the notion that the YI has been effective in teaching low-income, culturally-diverse youth skills that help them to transition into higher education and/or the workforce. In order to determine whether the outcomes found here are representative of the larger population, it may be beneficial for YI staff to develop a system for collecting tracking information on participants when they graduate from high school.

The vast majority (80%) of respondents remained involved with the YI or the YMCA as young adults. This involvement primarily consisted of staying in contact with YI staff and friends or volunteering for the YMCA/YI. This indicates that most participants were able to establish positive relationships with pro-social adults and were interested in being involved in and contributing to their community through volunteer service. Almost 70% of the participants currently were or had been employed by the YMCA, usually as after-school or High School YI summer staff. This employment likely provided both financial support and assisted in the further development of career skills and the exploration of career options.

In terms of program supports, the wilderness retreat, digital arts lab, and relationships with peers and staff were ranked by participants as most beneficial. However, all components were seen as more than somewhat beneficial, perhaps underscoring the need to have a comprehensive program offering multiple opportunities and supports. The lowest ranked

program offerings were related to academic and educational advising. This may suggest that efforts to strengthen, expand or better structure these academic support efforts may prove useful.

As hypothesized by the YI program model, these young adults reported that program participation contributed to the development of diverse technology and leadership skills which had positively contributed to their personal, academic, and professional lives. In addition, the majority reported that the YI had improved their educational attitudes and strengthened their desire to obtain a higher education. It appears that the YI also helped these young alumni to explore career options, obtain both part-time and full-time employment, and to use their skills in the workforce. Finally, most had ongoing relationships with YI staff or youth and continued to be involved in their communities.

Over three-quarters (76%) were currently enrolled or had graduated from some type of institution of higher education. While the choices of majors were quite diverse, the highest proportion of young adults studied digital media arts, or social work or social science degrees. In both instances, many credited their involvement for helping them decide on their chosen major and career path. These young adults (97%) indicated that the YI helped them to make their decisions regarding higher education, mainly through providing support and motivation and instilling the value of higher education. These strategies were particularly valued by those who were first-generation college students. Tangible supports such as assistance with paperwork and college field trips were also seen as useful for some. Thus, efforts to create a culture supporting higher education in the YI, both among adult staff and youth, should continue and, perhaps, become more structured. Given some of the comments here, it may also be helpful to ask those attending college to come back to share their experiences with high school youth since having

successful role models was seen as important. This mechanism might also be positively viewed by the college-age youth as many expressed their desire to stay involved and “give back.”

As noted earlier, many YI alumni had found employment opportunities with the YMCA or YI, which, of course, contributed to their economic wellbeing. About 75% of those who worked reported the YI had helped them to make decisions about their employment because it introduced them to career options. Responses to a couple of questions indicated that YI alumni tended to enter technology or computer fields or social or human service professions, perhaps modeling the dual focus of the YI. Regardless of the type of profession these young adults pursued, the supports they received, and skills (technology, interpersonal, leadership, etc) they learned, appeared to contribute to their success in the employment arena. It is worth noting that some of these young adults had developed skills which allowed them to enter careers without higher education.

In addition to these outcomes, the comments here frequently underscored the importance these young adults accorded to the support they received while in the YI and the relationships they had established with both staff and others. Many noted positive benefits beyond education and employment, suggesting that their participation helped them to develop to their full potential and interact effectively with diverse populations. Combining these findings with the qualitative data collected in the focus groups, should help to further elucidate and understand the impact of the program on young adults and their pathways to adulthood.

Further evidence of the positive perceptions that these participants had for the YI was found in the fact that the most frequent suggestions for improvement were to expand to serve more youth or that no changes were needed. In addition, efforts to expand the space, as suggested here, may prove beneficial to the program. It should also prove useful to earmark or

seek funds to allow for more trips, social events, volunteer or intern opportunities for youth, or scholarships for those wishing to attend college. The YI should continue to provide activities and support, like the weekend retreat, for college-age youth, as that was important to these alumni. It might also be beneficial for program managers to consider the type and range of staff and staff skill sets needed to best accomplish its goals.

In conclusion, the evidence here, albeit on a subsample of young adult alumni, indicates that the YI is meeting its' long-term goals related to stimulating interest in higher education, ensuring readiness for higher education or career entry after graduation, and promoting pro-social bonding and community attachment for the majority of alumni. Many of the technology, leadership, educational attitudes and positive youth development outcomes that were previously found in short-term evaluations of the program continue even after participants have left their high school years.