

**Youth Perceptions of Change Agent Productions:
Work Experiences and Outcomes**

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Introduction

Change Agent Productions is a social enterprise of the Greater Long Beach Downtown Community Development YMCA which began in October, 2007, with a grant from the ZeroDivide Foundation. Change Agent Productions (CAP) is comprised of professional digital media artists who work alongside urban youth who have graduated from the YMCA Youth Institute to carry out professional digital media projects. CAP was specifically designed to provide challenging, positive youth and career development opportunities for low-income, culturally-diverse high school and college-age youth. CAP work opportunities for youth are designed to build on the job skills training they received while in the Youth Institute and to help them more fully develop their business, academic, technical and social skills.

CAP was primarily designed to provide digital media services to community-based organizations and non-profits. CAP provides a wide-range of digital media services including video (documentaries, advertisements, public service announcements), graphics (corporate branding, brochures, professional reports, magazines), web (construction, layout, domain registration), audio-visual (on-site tech set-up and support, presentation equipment), training (movie-making, graphic design, digital media lab consultation), and digital media lab set-up and training.

CAP Interns

Graduates from the YMCA Youth Institute must apply for internships with CAP by filling out an application, providing their grades and completing an interview. This process helps them to develop skills in obtaining a job. In the application, youth are asked to list their recent Youth Institute involvement, current extracurricular activities,

number of hours per week they can work, the types of software and equipment they are most proficient with, and the technology skills they would like to further develop. In addition, they are asked about possible time obstacles, skills they would like to acquire, potential career fields and the relationship to CAP, and what they personally hope to accomplish through internship participation. They are selected for projects depending on their skill sets, availability, interests and acceptable grades. As of October 28, 2008, 40 high school and college-age youth had worked on at least one CAP project. During this time frame, CAP paid \$13,314.00 in stipends to these youth. The purpose of this study was to explore youth perceptions of, experiences with, and changes as a result of their involvement with Change Agent Productions during the first year of operation.

Methods

With the assistance of Change Agent Productions (CAP) staff, researchers from California State University Long Beach, Department of Social Work examined the experiences of Change Agent Productions (CAP) interns and how these experiences had impacted them. Data were collected through focus groups. CAP staff explained the purpose of the research and distributed informed consent forms to the 40 youth who had been CAP interns during its first nine months of operation. If they were under 18 years of age, consent forms were also provided to their parents. After the youth returned the sealed envelopes with the consents to the staff, the Art Director arranged the times for the focus groups to meet. The focus groups were conducted by an Associate Professor of Social Work from California State University, Long Beach.

Three focus groups were conducted in August and September 2008 at the Downtown Community Development Branch YMCA. Between 6 to 10 youth

participated in each focus group. Out of 40 eligible youth, 24 (60%) participated in the study. As shown below in Table 1, two-thirds (67%) of the participants were male. Their ages ranged from 14 to 18 years (Mean = 15.83 years; SD = .92). The majority (63%) were Latino followed by Asian-American/Pacific Islander and Mixed/Bi-Racial (12.5% each), African-American (8%) and European-American (4%).

Table 1
Change Agent Productions Focus Group Sample Demographics
N = 24

	Percent	Frequency
Gender		
Male	67%	16
Female	33%	8
Ethnicity		
Latino	63%	15
Asian-American/Pacific Islander	12.5%	3
Mixed/Bi-Racial	12.5%	3
African-American	8%	2
European-American	4%	1
Age		
14	4%	1
15	33%	8
16	42%	10
17	17%	4
18	4%	1

Each focus group lasted between 1 ½ hours and 2 ¼ hours. Open-ended questions were developed by the researchers to solicit information about the youths' engagement

with CAP and to ensure that the same issues were explored in all three focus groups. The following questions were asked during each focus group:

- (1) How they were selected for the jobs,
- (2) What skills they developed while working at CAP,
- (3) What they learned about the world of work and working with others,
- (4) What they found challenging,
- (5) What suggestions they had for CAP staff to make their experiences better,
- (6) How CAP helped them with their future goals, and
- (7) What they would have done differently if they had the chance to turn the clock back.

Analysis

The focus groups were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. A focus group approach was adopted since it allowed for an in-depth scrutiny of the youths' experiences and views (Kitzinger, 1995; Morgan, 1998). The data were analyzed using a modified grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This approach allowed for the efficient yet exhaustive collection of data regarding the youths' subjective perceptions and experiences with CAP. This method also proved to be an ideal means of exploring these issues as they provided a naturalistic context for data collection (Weinberger et al., 1998).

Findings

This report presents the findings of the focus group discussions about the youths' involvement with CAP. The major themes brought up by the interns and identified by the researcher fell into the following areas; (1) types of jobs performed, (2) preparation to be

working members of society, (3) personal growth, (4) friendships, (5) challenges, (6) future goals, and (7) what would have been done differently if the clock could be turned back.

Types of Jobs

According to these interns, CAP primarily provided digital media services to community-based and non-profit organizations. All interns were taught digital media skills during their time in the Youth Institute, a comprehensive, positive youth development-technology program that is a prerequisite to CAP internships. For example, they were taught how to use video cameras, and to shoot films and edit them while in the Youth Institute. The majority of CAP interns indicated that they took part in the production of documentaries, advertisements, and public service announcements. Some interns, however, were involved in photography or graphic design which enabled them to produce brochures and magazines. A few worked on web page construction and maintenance. In short, CAP provided freelancing opportunities to the youth to do jobs that utilized computer skills, digital media, or other skills.

I recorded stuff like documentaries ... did photography, and edited movies.

We went with Change Agent Productions to Palm Springs and did digital media things. We went around and took pictures and filmed conferences to turn into promotional videos.

After-School Programs

Many of the interns worked on training projects for after-school staff or participants. CAP interns demonstrated the technology they had learned in the Youth Institute and at CAP to new after-school programs or to existing programs wanting to upgrade their activities and services.

I went with Change Agent Productions to L.A. and we taught people who were starting a youth program about technology; how to use a video camera, how to edit the movies, and how to add music to their movie.

I have also helped them with Legacy Ladies in L.A. and the youth group over there.

Having staff with professional backgrounds in digital media technology, as well as expertise in after-school programs, gave CAP a cutting-edge advantage among after-school programs in terms of the types of projects they had for interns. Since the YMCA Youth Institute is recognized as a model program, the majority of CAP interns had the chance to travel within the greater Los Angeles region and to cities in other parts of the country to teach what they had learned to other after-school programs. Occasionally, CAP interns also visited other after-school programs to learn what they were doing.

One time we went to San Francisco and went to learn about a program that they created there ...and then we told them something about us.

I have gone to Oakland and Richmond with Change Agent Productions to record the other youth institutes there and how they were different or similar from here.

The majority of interns also had the chance to travel to various after-school conferences where CAP advertised their services. CAP interns were provided opportunities to demonstrate what they had learned by providing training. They also provided audio-visual technical assistance to conference participants.

At [after-school conferences] we set up the equipment for teachers and ran them. We helped the teachers with the presentations they were giving.

I worked with CAP on the Queen Mary. We set up equipment for teachers and we checked it. We helped them with the presentations they were giving.

Web Design

A few interns also helped in designing and maintaining the CAP webpage. They encoded promotional videos and pictures and put them on the Internet periodically.

I encode all the promotional videos they make and put them on the web. I put all the pictures into a photo gallery so the viewer can go and see the experience through the eyes of those taking part in the experiences.

Magazine Articles

Several interns wrote for a local magazine focused on career development that targeted middle and high school students.

I did a lot of writing jobs. I had to write some articles for a magazine. The last one was for a company called "Pacific Gateway."

I did one on people that worked in the airport, and one on the port of Long Beach. I got information from the Internet, and from different places in Long Beach itself.

One intern described how he provided clerical support in the CAP office.

I used to handle a lot of the data entry and information for Change Agent Productions; keeping files, organizing things like that. I kept their information on file to keep things organized. I used a computer and programs like Microsoft Word and Excel.

Preparation to be Working Members of Society

All the interns thought that the projects they worked on with CAP were serious endeavors. As one said, "They are preparing us to become working members of society and to contribute. They are preparing us for work, which is what we are going to do for the rest of our lives after college." They clearly recognized that work they did required some degree of professionalism.

This is work alright, this is serious work. It's not like you can just come and go as you wish. They can fire us.

I remember them saying that if you flaked on them, it's going to be really hard to get another job because that means you can't be trusted on your engagements.

It showed us how to work; we are not here to play around. It shows adults that we can take on responsibilities. Along with the workload, it helps us realize that when we grow up and work we need a sense of responsibility. So we mature and develop as people and become more responsible and loyal to the job.

An intern described what he learned from CAP about what professionalism entailed.

They teach us people skills; like instead of saying no I don't know where that is, you say, oh let me help you, let me find out where this is for you.

Communication

Working on CAP projects also taught the interns about the importance of communication. Communication was particularly important since they worked as a team on many projects. All the interns described or agreed that good communication was essential for them to accomplish their assignments. They also mentioned that they had become better at expressing themselves and listening to others.

Knowing how to express yourself and let [other interns] know what ideas you have, so the product can be better. You really need to know how to speak your mind, without offending anybody else.

I developed listening skills, like learning how to do something, learning how to follow someone else while they are teaching someone, and then picking up on their skills.

Communication was also important since many of the interns had to teach or demonstrate to others (e.g., in conjunction with After-School University) about their skills and the work they had done with CAP.

Our teaching skills increase, and conversation skills. If you were a quiet person when you started, every time you work for them you improve.

Working as a Team

Together with effective communication, all the interns mentioned their new awareness of interdependence within the workplace. They had to trust one another and each person had to be responsible.

Along with that, you have to learn trust. If you don't trust your teammates you are not going to be able to do anything really. If you don't trust anyone, you want to do everything. It's going to be a lot of stress for you, so you have to learn how to trust your teammates, and how to assign work.

We all have different skills and knowledge sets and we help each other out.

Patience

All the youth also reported that they had learned about the importance of patience when dealing with various work situations. One intern described the importance of having to be patient with the clients.

If you are teaching a big group, you don't want to get stressed out too much. If you have a person that doesn't catch on really well, you don't want to get impatient with them. You want to sit there and help them.

Another intern shared about being patient with the equipment she had.

If a camera wasn't working properly when we were developing movies, it would take awhile. I would get really frustrated and upset, so they told me that I needed to be more patient.

Ability to Adapt

About half of the interns described how they had learned to adapt when it came to dealing with team members or their work situation.

Different people have different work skills and work habits. If you are going to work with them, you have to know these things. How else are you going to work or how are you going to finish your project?

There's a lot that goes into film making, like how much time you have. That greatly affects how you are going to do your movie. How are you

going to approach it, what do you have in hand, what are your capabilities, what equipment do you have?

Dealing with Competition

Getting a CAP job could be competitive for the interns. A few of them indicated that they had to vie with other youth for the limited job opportunities.

You have to be better than other people. A lot of people here want to work for Change Agent Productions and it's really hard, especially if you have a best friend and they also want to work, it's really hard for you

I know she went on more jobs than me. I think it is more competitive because she had way more jobs than me.

Consequently, they learned to have a healthy outlook toward competition.

We're friends, so we don't really get mad at each other for getting a job. I really wanted to go but I hope you have a good time, just let me know how it goes. There's other job opportunities so it's not like you are never going to get another opportunity.

Because some people here have more experience than others, they would get looked at first and then you would probably be a back-up.

Networking

A few of the youth described their views on networking with clients.

If you have a good client, you should always take your job seriously and do a good job for that client. That way that client can always come back to you. You never know, you might get really far with that client.

There was one person I ran into; I was there during the whole meeting and I kept helping her, she offered to help me after high school if I ever needed something.

Work Attitudes

Perhaps most profoundly, CAP helped change the attitudes that the youth had toward work. Several reported that CAP helped them take on a different view of work;

that it could be an interesting endeavor. Their role models sometimes portrayed work as very boring. They worked only to make ends meet.

I learned that work is not always tedious because sometimes work can be portrayed by our parents as very boring. You have to do it and you just can't avoid it. Change Agent Productions presented us with more adventurous or more cosmopolitan ways of approaching a job.

Change Agent Productions introduced us to more exciting and interesting ways of approaching work. For instance, photography which is an urban art entices our emotions and makes us want to go out and do more since we like our jobs.

Personal Growth

All the participants reported that Change Agent Productions (CAP) helped them to grow personally. According to some interns, CAP helped them "become a better person overall," and others reported becoming more mature.

Along with the workload, it helps us realize that when we grow up and work we need a sense of responsibility. So we mature and develop as a person and become more responsible and loyal to the job.

Self-Awareness

Many of the issues the youth brought up regarding personal growth indicated that they had become more discerning of themselves. They were more aware about how they presented themselves, were more thoughtful, and did not react rashly to circumstances.

I've learned to know my place, I guess you would say. Usually when I would get in conversations, I would tend to be rude or blunt, like I would say stuff that didn't need to be said, that I shouldn't. I have become more aware.

Each time you go through a job you learn more and you learn how to grow up a little bit more and how to get to a standard and level where you are suppose to be.

Some people will get in your face and get angry. You have to learn how to communicate with them without getting angry. And with people that are really shy you have to get to their level and communicate well with them.

Several of the youth indicated that they were also more discerning about when to ask for help. One youth, for example, said that he would try to figure things out to the best of his ability before asking somebody for help. Yet another intern expressed the value of asking for help.

I got better with Photoshop because I did not just sit there at the computer playing with stuff. I asked somebody, one of the Change Agent Productions people, how to do this and they'd showed me.

Time Management

The overwhelming majority of CAP interns also reported that they learned how to manage their time better, how to decide what was important, and about setting priorities. A few pointed out that when they had school projects that needed to be completed they would no longer procrastinate. They were had become better disciplined and were now able to meet deadlines with homework. Two of the youths described how they scheduled their time.

If we go to a job and it involves traveling somewhere else, we may get a week off from school, but when we go back to school we have to make up all our work so it also teaches us how to balance school and work.

I learned how to prioritize my life, what's important to me, especially in homework, what I have to do, what I have to do next.

Enthusiasm

About half of the interns expressed that they had become more enthusiastic about school activities and after-school projects because of their involvement with CAP.

Before, I used to want to get through school, not try to join any projects, anything like that, but now I really like getting into more things, more activities.

There's really a lot more out there that you can do. Before Change Agent Productions, I didn't really know what was going on, it was just school.

Self Confidence

Another indicator of personal growth was related to the sense of confidence that the interns had developed through their work with Change Agent Productions. They were not discouraged when things did not go according to plan, but took it as a learning opportunity. The majority of youths expressed such confidence.

Change Agent Productions helps us with our leadership skills, so when we get out into the real world we can hold up on our own so we won't cave in as much as the more inexperienced person next to us.

When you work, there are some mistakes, but that can be a good thing too. When you make mistakes, they [CAP staff] will teach you more stuff. You make a lot of mistakes on the way but its nothing you can't fix.

Friendships

All the CAP interns expressed enthusiastically the friendships that they had established with one another. According to one intern:

After becoming really close friends and spending time and having to go through all this pressure of making a film and stuff, you grow as a team, and because of that you see them as family.

CAP interns are graduates from the YMCA Youth Institute. Thus, the CAP interns had already established friendships with other interns prior to their involvement with CAP. This created a congenial atmosphere where the CAP interns could work together efficaciously in accomplishing the tasks they did for CAP. As part of their initiation when joining the YMCA Youth Institute, the youths underwent a week-long wilderness training camp. Some of the CAP interns fondly recalled their camp experiences.

Somehow during the wilderness camp or something, the masks that people use to cover themselves were broken and you can see deep through them.

They put you in a situation where you are really scared, but people there help you out, and you become friends with them.

The interns' involvement with CAP projects further deepened their awareness of being interdependent and building on the relationships formed in the Youth Institute. Consequently, these youth developed trusting relationships with their peers and staff. Over time, as they worked together on more CAP projects, the interns considered other interns as an integral part of their social support network, and CAP staff, their mentors.

This program teaches us how to work together to accomplish what we need. We had to combine our ideas, and share our thoughts so we could finish our task.

You are comfortable to go tell them whatever you want. You're comfortable to hang out with them.

The bonding between the youth is poignantly described:

After somebody else tells you something, as a human being ... you just want to be there for that person after hearing their sad or tragic story, or their life ... then because of that you'll open yourself to all these people. You become close friends with them.

Diversity

Because the Youth Institute and CAP draws an ethnically-diverse group of interns, all the interns reported that they have included, in their circle of friends, individuals who are ethnically different from them and who they would not have gotten to know if they were not involved with the Youth Institute and CAP. Through interacting and working with other interns, they see beyond the superficial differences that divide people. They find the common humanity they share with others.

Sometimes you may not like someone, how they look or just anything. You don't like them, but as you go along you find out that you can depend on them. You can trust them with anything pretty much.

We are taught how to accept diversity and different races; people from across the world. These days kids are in their own cliques. They have

buddies. There are gangs everywhere. They [CAP] helps us to choose different people, not just stick with what you are comfortable with.

A Solace

Being involved with the Youth Institute and CAP became an outlet for stress for some of the youth. Interns found that their involvement with CAP could be a solace where they could forget their worries.

There are pressures of school, and sometimes work, and sometimes sports, and sometimes family. This is like a get away to relieve stress, rather than produce stress for us in the long run.

Being around people that you know, and maybe you don't know, but you will get to know them, learning new stuff, it makes you happy. It makes you release all the stress that you had.

Work Challenges and CAP Staff

When asked what they found challenging about working with CAP, all of the interns interviewed either reported or agreed that working for CAP had been challenging to them. Professionalism and high standards were expected and they were sometimes challenged to perform beyond their expectations. What the interns found challenging was unique to each youth. Spurred by CAP staff, the interns were pushed to realize their potentials.

They would look at [my project] and say, "ok, it's good", but for me they have higher expectations and it's not good enough. I can do better, and that helps me to eventually get a better project than what I started on.

They make you step out of your comfort zone.

It helps you out with leadership skills; if you are really quiet, they may try to put you out there to talk more but not under pressure. They will just put you there to talk and eventually you open up more.

When the youth were asked to make suggestions regarding CAP staff and what they could do to make their experiences better, they could not think of

anything to say. They only expressed high regards and respect for CAP staff.

According to two of the interns:

If we have a problem where we need help, they will be there to help us. They don't just sit us down "do this" and leave. They stay there. When needed they help us with what we have to get done.

If you are having a hard time at home or problems with people at school, you can come to and talk to [CAP staff] here. They will just help you through it.

Future Goals

All the youth interviewed agreed that working for CAP helped them to better understand their future goals. Several interns reported that they discovered a natural affinity for graphic design and digital media technology while working for CAP. If they were not involved in CAP, they would not have had such an epiphany.

I grew up wanting to be a firefighter and then when I came in I started to really like graphic design and editing movies

[CAP] opened my eyes to look towards the arts.

Some interns who had no intention of making a career in the digital media arts nonetheless thought that working for CAP was beneficial to them.

Not all of us want to become graphic designers or photographers or editors or directors. It doesn't mean that all of us are going to change our goals. It just gives us a chance to see more that is out there and have more opportunities.

I am still searching but I have an understanding of what I like to do. [CAP] gives me a better understanding of what I want to do and how I have to pursue it.

Several others, who did not directly perceive a career in the art or digital media field as their career preference, claimed that working for CAP indirectly helped them with the careers that they were more interested in.

I'm planning on becoming a network administrator. Actually, Change Agent Productions helped me a lot. They showed me how to set up a network and servers. When I take a [college] course in it, I'll already understand what I'm supposed to be doing and how things work. It makes my chances of succeeding in college much better.

I want to become an aerospace engineer. Change Agent Productions has helped me use different computer programs. Those computer skills might help me in engineering because nowadays, it's not just drawing. It's mostly working on computers and making designs on it.

One youth who wanted to go into the music field reported:

They were helping me physically and mentally with what I need for a music career. For example, interacting with people, making the music, helping me with the different types of computer programs, they gave me lots of insights talking to people and figuring out what types of things people like to listen to.

What They Would Have Done Differently

The interns' enthusiasm about CAP was evident when they were asked what they would have done differently if they could turn the clock back. Looking in hindsight, the overwhelming majority indicated that they wanted to be more involved with CAP. The following were some of their comments.

I wished I paid attention a little more, so I could have gained more knowledge; so I could do more jobs with them.

I would have got my grades up higher so I could work on more projects.

I would have come [to CAP] a little more because sometimes they'll be giving jobs on days that I don't know and then I'll regret it.

I wished I had ventured into more advanced programs so I could be more of use, be more versatile for Change Agent Productions.

Conclusion

In 2007, the YMCA Youth Institute received funding from the California Community Technology Foundation to open Change Agent Productions, a social

enterprise endeavor designed to provide paid internships to youth in the areas of digital movie making, graphic design, web design, conference AV support, technology set-up and consultation, for school districts and non-profits. This social enterprise consists of digital artists who work alongside the urban youth from traditionally underrepresented populations with the intent of teaching the youth corporate skills. The data gathered from CAP interns during the focus groups held in August and September, 2008 overwhelmingly suggests that serving as CAP interns had been a positive experience for all the youth. CAP had been instrumental in helping them grow personally and to mature graciously as they approach adulthood. CAP had also created a congenial environment whereby the youth could establish a nourishing social support system for one another while having positive, yet challenging, adult mentors. In addition, the youth always felt support from CAP staff. For many, they were their mentors and role models. The evidence gathered in this report also suggested that the symbiotic nature of the relationship between the Youth Institute and CAP was valuable to these youth. This underscored the importance of embedding social enterprises, especially those for youth, in the context of comprehensive social service initiatives. The findings here might also underscore the need for staff working in youth-focused social enterprise endeavors to have youth development skills as well as technical skills.

Youth were able to work on different types of jobs and to further develop and enhance the technology skills they learned in the Youth Institute. Although the gender and ethnic ratio differences were not as large in the full group of CAP interns (N = 40) as they were in this subsample (N = 24), CAP staff should keep gender and ethnic diversity in mind as they recruit future interns. This study also found that CAP had helped the

youth learn many positive aspects about the world of work as well as the qualities that might help them to be successful. They appeared to develop a broad range of skills and qualities that should contribute to their future careers. It instilled excitement in them about their future and their potential careers. CAP equipped the students with a wider and more optimistic vision of the world of work. It also appeared, in some instances, that youth became more involved with or committed to school as a result of their CAP involvement. In brief, all the youth expressed overwhelming enthusiasm about their involvement with CAP and most hoped that they would have the opportunity to work with CAP in the future. They found it an enriching experience in multiple ways, personally, socially, and professionally. Thus, it appears that during its' first year, CAP met many of its social goals and objectives.

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