



OPPORTUNITY IN OUR BACKYARD: HOW COLLABORATION ON SUMMER YOUTH EMPLOYMENT CAN BENEFIT BOTH UNIVERSITIES AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES

MARCH 2019

By Sruthi Naraharisetti, Graduate Research Assistant, Poverty Solutions; Natalie Peterson, Graduate Research Assistant, Poverty Solutions; Jennifer Erb-Downward, Senior Research Associate, Poverty Solutions

OVERVIEW

Attaining a college degree is a well-recognized path to economic mobility in the United States,¹ but enrollment gaps among students by family income persist. Interestingly, recent research finds this disparity to be particularly visible in communities where top ranked universities reside.² In these communities, residents with no-affiliation to their local university face low rates of economic mobility from one generation to the next³ and universities see low rates of application and enrollment from nearby neighborhoods struggling with poverty. This pattern is reflective of the deep economic divides that exist between the families of students attending selective universities and local residents. On average, the median parent household income of college students at these schools is

more than \$62,000 greater than the median household income of residents in the community surrounding the college campus (\$116,687 compared to \$54,174, respectively).⁴

Many schools are now actively seeking ways to bridge the divide between students and the surrounding community through local engagement and improved recruitment. This brief describes a unique partnership between Washtenaw County, MichiganWorks! and the University of Michigan (UM) to pilot a university-engaged Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) and highlights opportunities this model presents for both universities and local youth. Data from this brief come from the first year of the partnership.

KEY FINDINGS

- University-engaged summer youth employment programs are a promising strategy for building mutually beneficial relationships between universities and their surrounding communities. All youth participants surveyed reported a positive experience with the program and qualitative feedback from UM employers reflected similar sentiments.
- The University of Michigan was able to reach local communities that have historically been underrepresented in college enrollment. Eighty-two percent of youth who participated in the program were from Washtenaw county zip codes with the highest child poverty rates where university enrollment has historically been low.
- Participation in the SYEP increased comfort and preparedness for applying to college. Over 80% of youth surveyed reported that they felt more prepared to apply for college because of the program.
- Program administration requires an initial investment by both community and academic partners, but partnership on summer youth employment is logistically feasible and mutually beneficial. University engagement in summer youth employment programs present opportunities to address persistent college application gaps among local low-income youth who do not apply to universities, despite their academic qualifications.

BACKGROUND

In fall 2016, Poverty Solutions at U-M began collaborating with Washtenaw County on a pilot of a campus-based Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP), with the goal to employ 30-50 young people in the summer of 2017 in departments across the university. U-M and the County both agreed to target youth from two high-poverty Washtenaw County zip codes.

All participating youth received six hours of professional development training prior to employment and were guaranteed 10-week job placements at 20 hours per week. For youth employed at U-M their positions were supplemented with additional job supports including:

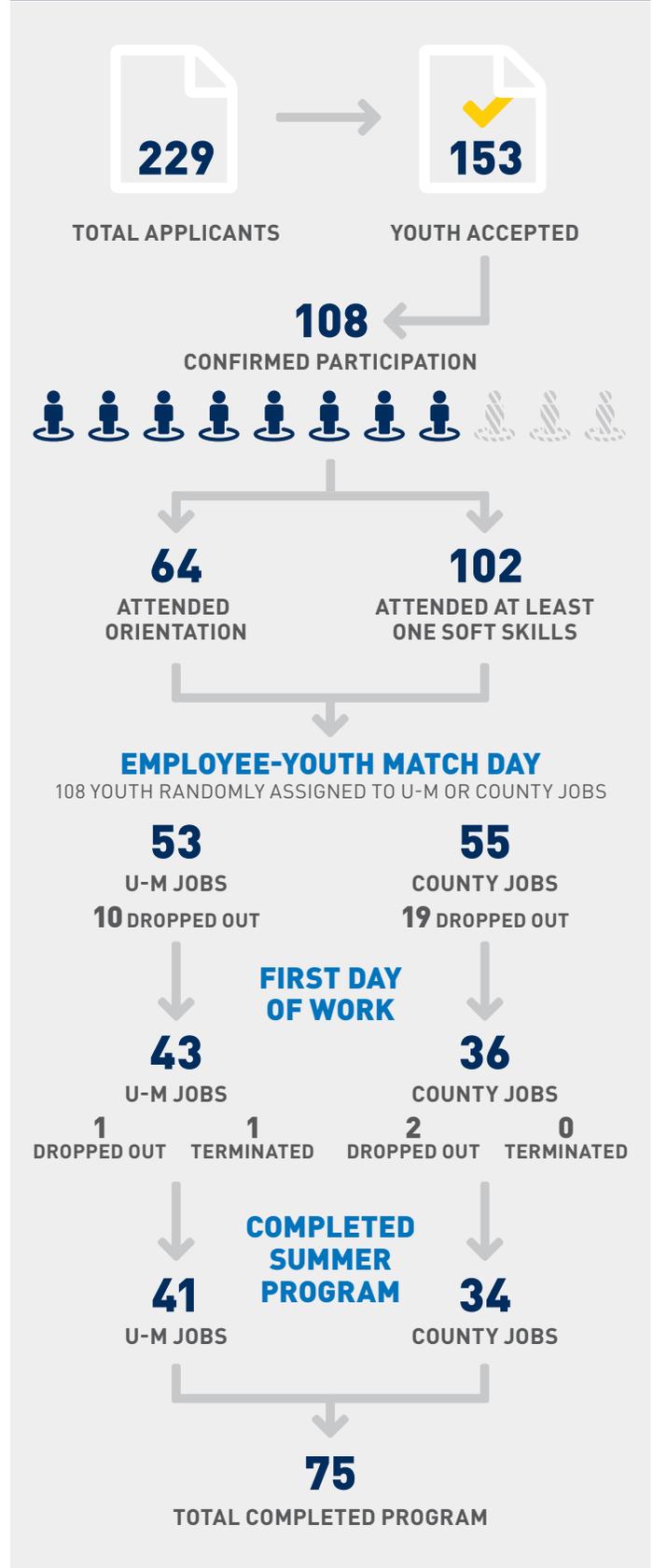
- Formal mentoring by individuals close in age to the youth themselves (“near peers”). These “success coaches,” served dual purposes: to provide support for the summer job experience, and to serve as college-going role models for youth in the program. Youth met at least weekly with their success coach.
- Paid skill-development sessions. On Friday of each week, the student employees obtained educational content organized by campus experts, facilitated by success coaches and featuring topics such as effective communication, healthy relationships, college and financial aid, conflict management, technology skills, and leadership.
- Employer training. The site supervisors for each U-M summer youth employee also received training at the beginning of the program and were provided with a direct link to the success coach of the youth working in their department. This enhanced supervisor ability to manage youth, some for whom this was their first job experience, and the communication support structure served to identify and resolve issues faced by the employer or the youth employee.

In addition to providing supplemental professional development supports for youth in U-M job placements, U-M also coordinated and supported the internal U-M employer outreach and hiring process, supported administration of the overall program and tracked and evaluated program impact. This coordination between community partners allowed for the randomization of youth into University or County job placements and was done to support rigorous future evaluation of program activities.

SURPRISES & SUCCESSES

In summer 2017, a total of 229 Washtenaw County SYEP applications were received, 153 youth were accepted into the program, and 77 youth were placed into either a U-M or County job.

FIGURE 1: SUMMER 2017 YOUTH PARTICIPATION



One surprise at the very start of the program was the large drop off in number of students from the point of acceptance into the program to the first day of employment (153 to 79 respectively). The low participation rate by summer youth in the orientation session (64 youth) was also a surprise. This resulted in significant follow up and outreach support to engage more youth at the onset of the program. During the program's second year, these findings led to the provision of a stipend for participation in pre-employment program orientation sessions. Because of this change early program attrition was dramatically reduced in year two.

A clear success of the program in the pilot year was its ability to reach youth from the targeted zip codes while remaining open to all applicants regardless of economic background. Ninety-five percent of all participating youth lived in Washtenaw County and 82% lived in the two targeted county zip codes with the highest child poverty rates (21% and 32%). The majority of the remaining youth lived in areas where the child poverty rate was above the countywide average (13.7%).

In addition to coming primarily from the geographically targeted areas of the county, the individual characteristics of participants also were reflective of local students whom the university has historically had a greater challenge of reaching. This can be seen in the demographic table of participants who were randomized into the County and U-M program arms. Roughly two thirds of participating students identified as African American and 51% were from families with an annual income of less than \$35,000.

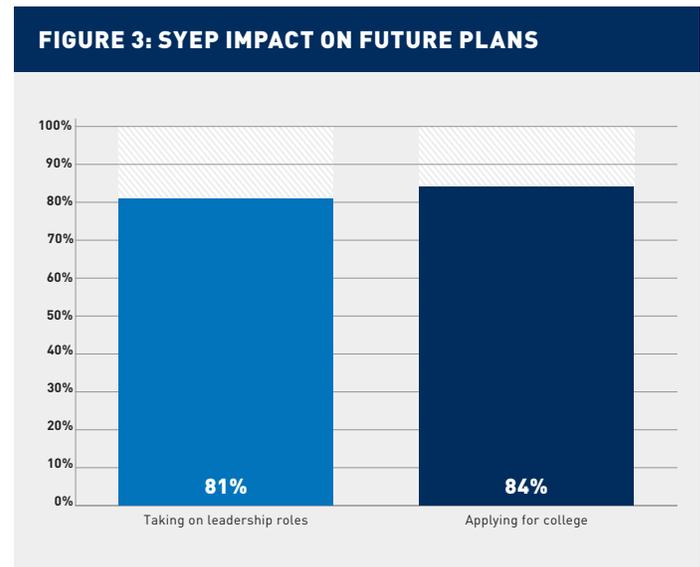
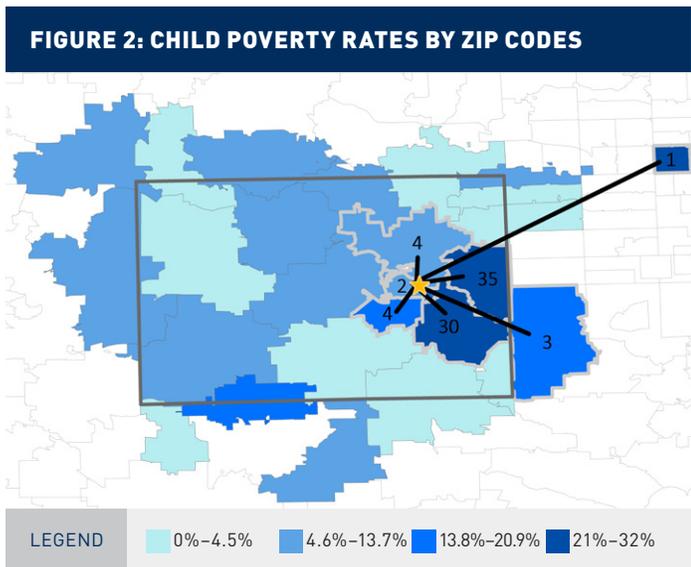
The success of the recruitment and randomization process allowed for preliminary exploration of the pilot program's impact and also laid the ground for future program expansion. In 2018, 100 youth were employed through the program and by the summer of 2019 the program plans to expand to serve 150-200 youth.

BENEFITS OF PARTNERSHIP

Preliminary findings from the Washtenaw County SYEP suggest that university engagement is a promising strategy for building trust between universities and local communities, increasing youths' comfort with college campuses, recruiting youth who are applying to college from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, and promoting economic mobility through investment in youth employees.

Not only did the program effectively reach low-income youth from zip codes where university enrollment has historically been low, it also reached youth of age for college recruitment. Eighty-seven percent (87%) of students were college-going ages between 16-18 years old and will be making decision about college in the immediate future. This makes preliminary pilot findings even more compelling for universities and colleges interested in increasing their reach and enrollment from nearby economically disadvantaged communities.

While the first year pilot sample size is small (n=33) and only indicative of self-reported views, youth who participated in the U-M program reported that the experience had a positive im-



Source: Poverty Solutions SYEP Survey (2017)

Note: Sample size is 33 participants who participated in the university engaged Summer Youth Employment Program.

TABLE 1: SUMMER 2017 PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

VARIABLE	CATEGORIES	COUNTY NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS	U-M NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS	TOTALS	
				TOTAL	PERCENTAGE
AGE	16 – 18	32	38	70	89%
	19 – 22	2	3	5	6%
	23 – 24	2	1	3	4%
	Blank	1	0	1	1%
	TOTAL	37	42	79	100%
RACE/ETHNICITY	African American	24	25	49	62%
	Arab-American	2	1	3	4%
	Asian	0	3	3	4%
	Bi-racial	6	5	11	14%
	Caucasian	3	4	7	9%
	Hispanic/Latino	2	2	4	5%
	Native American	0	0	0	0%
	Blank	0	2	2	3%
	TOTAL	37	42	79	100%
HOUSEHOLD INCOME	Under \$15,000	8	8	16	20%
	\$15,000-\$24,999	10	6	16	20%
	\$25,000-\$34,999	5	4	9	11%
	\$35,000-\$49,999	3	4	7	9%
	\$50,000-\$74,999	6	7	13	16%
	\$75,000-\$99,999	2	6	8	10%
	\$100,000+	3	7	10	13%
	TOTAL	37	42	79	100%
GENDER	Female	18	19	37	47%
	Male	19	23	42	53%
	TOTAL	37	42	79	100%
PUBLIC BENEFITS	Public Income Assistance	16	15	31	39%
	School Lunch Program	25	18	43	54%

pact on their college aspirations with 84% saying they felt more prepared to apply for college. Youth also reported that the program positively affected their readiness to take on leadership roles with 81% saying they felt more prepared. Universities are particularly well placed to influence these dimensions highlighting opportunities inherent to the program structure.

Departments across the university were enthusiastic to participate in the program. Over 35 departments and over 35 U-M supervisors participated in the program investing \$62,500 in youth employees over the summer through job placements. Of participating youth surveyed, 100% reported an overall positive experience with the program.

“ I LOVED EVERYTHING ABOUT IT [SYEP]. I LOVED MY SITE AND SUPERVISOR. I LOVED HOW MUCH OUR SUCCESS COACH CARED AND HOW THEY MADE SURE WE WERE TAKING CARE OF EVERYTHING. MOST IMPORTANTLY, I LOVED THE MOTIVATING ENVIRONMENT.”
— Program Participant

Qualitative feedback from UM employers reflected similar sentiments. In addition to improving university connections with surrounding low-income communities, UM supervisors reported positive impacts from participation in the program that they had not anticipated.

“ ABSOLUTELY RECOMMEND IT. YOU GET TO HELP A YOUNG PERSON AND MAYBE SET THEM ON A PATH THEY WOULDN'T HAVE FOUND OTHERWISE, WHICH IS EXCITING. ALSO, INTERNS CAN BRING A SPECIAL SORT OF VIBE WITH THEM THAT ENERGIZES THE OFFICE THEY'RE PLACED IN. THE INTERNS OFFER A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE THAT CAN BE VERY INFORMATIVE.”
— UM Supervisor

DISCUSSION

The University of Michigan has made commitments to serving students of all economic backgrounds in its student body, and has developed a diversity and inclusion strategic plan⁵ “based on the conviction that excellence is not possible without diversity in the broadest sense of the word.” Preliminary findings from the University of Michigan’s engagement with the Washtenaw County SYEP suggest that university-community partnerships around summer youth employment could create an upward spiral of positive impacts. These findings are consistent with positive impacts demonstrated by summer youth

employment programs in other areas of the country, however, unique to the Washtenaw County Program, is the engagement of the University in employment, professional development, training, administrative support and evaluation expertise. This pilot demonstrates that this type of community-academic partnership around summer youth employment is both logistically feasible and mutually beneficial. Preliminary data suggest university engagement may present opportunities to address persistent college application gaps among local low-income youth who do not apply to universities despite their academic qualifications.

CONCLUSION

University-County SYEPs have the potential to unlock tremendous value and opportunity for universities to invest in the local community, recruit a diverse socio-economic student body to their campus from the surrounding area, and generally stimulate economic mobility by harnessing and supporting the capital of local area youth and programming. By building upon potential pipelines that already exist in the community, universities may improve recruitment of low-income students from their local surroundings. The model of the University of Michigan’s engagement with Washtenaw County SYEP is replicable and mutually beneficial for both university and community participants. As universities across the country seek to bridge long-standing community-university economic divides, and broadly invest in the economic mobility of our next generation, engagement in county summer youth employment programs represent a promising opportunity.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to acknowledge all partner organizations and departments involved in the W-SYEP including: University of Michigan Human Resources, University of Michigan Youth Policy Lab, University of Michigan Ginsberg Center for Community Service, Washtenaw County Office of Community & Economic Development and Human Resources, Michigan Works! Southeast, Washtenaw Alliance for Children and Youth and Washtenaw Intermediate School District.

We would also like to acknowledge the following Individuals for their contributions to the paper: Julia Weinert, Joshua Rivera, Kate Naranjo, and Luke Shaefer.

REFERENCES

- 1 Greenstone, M., Looney, A., Patashnik, J., and Muxin Yu. "Thirteen Economic Facts about Social Mobility and the Role of Education" Brookings. 2013. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/research/thirteen-economic-facts-about-social-mobility-and-the-role-of-education/>
- 2 Walton Radford, Alexandria. "No Point in Applying: Why Poor Students Are Missing at Top Colleges" The Atlantic. 2013. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2013/09/no-point-in-applying-why-poor-students-are-missing-at-top-colleges/279699/>
- 3 Chetty, R., and Nathaniel Hendren. "The Impact of Neighborhoods on Intergenerational Mobility: Childhood Exposure Effects and County-Level Estimates*" *Harvard University and NBER*. 2015. Retrieved from https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/hendren/files/nbhds_paper.pdf
- 4 Poverty Solutions. 2018. University of Michigan
- 5 Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion Summit. "Strategic Plan" *University of Michigan*. 2018. Retrieved from <http://diversity.umich.edu/strategic-plan>