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Marin County Youth Focus Group Project: Youth Perception Regarding Access and Barriers to Equitable Education and Careers

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Marin County Youth Focus Group Project:

Youth Perception Regarding
Access and Barriers to Equitable Education and Careers

Findings and Recommendations
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Introduction

This collaborative project between the Workforce Investment Board of Marin and Dominican University of California emerged through the DUC Service-Learning Director's involvement in a subcommittee of the Workforce Investment Board of Marin. The subcommittee's mission is to identify needs of jobseekers, employers, and the future workforce. Youth voice and perception are vital to understanding how to create, maintain, and evolve towards greater sustainability and a thriving workforce with equitable opportunities for everyone. We purposely targeted youth of diverse ethnicities who participate in county and non-profit programs aimed, in a variety of ways, at their empowerment.

The purpose of the youth focus groups was to acquire qualitative data based on youth perceptions regarding their educational experience, the opportunities available to them in higher education, and their knowledge of what services are currently available to them in Marin County to support their educational success. This project received funding through a grant from the DUC Provost's Office and the project proposal, RBPHS Application #5069, was submitted to and approved by the Dominican University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects. Funding allowed us to offer hospitality to focus groups, $10 gift certificates to participants, and to hire the Research and Evaluation Team from Youth Leadership Institute to train our team in focus group methodology—including question formulation, group facilitation techniques, and documenting, organizing, and analyzing data. The investigators came from outside the field of K-12 education and the findings are based directly on the youth responses and our observations during the groups.

Report contents are divided into sections that attempt to make clear how findings were derived and what they might mean for better understanding the educational challenges and needs of youth in Marin County and the ways in which existing programs might come together and new initiatives may be implemented in response. Sections for this report occur in the following manner:

- An overview summarizes key findings and conclusions in an effort to highlight next steps for addressing educational success for Marin County youth based on the perceptions of participants.

- Data collection procedures are presented to make clear how information was gathered to assess youth perceptions, which includes the questions posed to them by facilitators to do so.

- Procedures for analyzing data are presented to explain derivation of findings.

- Focus group participants are described to understand the sample of youth responses subjected to analyses and how findings might be generalized to other populations.

- Findings are presented and interpreted to make clear youth perceptions as reported by participants about a variety of topics related to educational equity in their community.

- Conclusions are drawn from a summary of findings that provide the framework for discussion in the overview.

- Appendices: Data tables: Appendix A, Profile for Youth Participants; Appendix B, Analyzed Response Breakdown by group for Questions 3,4,5, Appendix

Overview

What is the purpose/benefit of going to school? This question usually elicited the standard answer that with probes revealed troubling inconsistencies. For example, here is one fairly typical answer:

"To get an education and give you something to do and make it through life.
(Why are you in school?) "Cause I need to be or I'll be in trouble.
(Are you learning anything useful now?) "No. I want to."

This response is emblematic of our findings. Predominantly, youth expressed a positive attitude about themselves and their futures. Yet, trends in perceptions and attitudes came to the surface that told different stories and uncovered schisms between what youth were conditioned to say and possibly believe about themselves and their actual experience.

Almost all of the youth participants stated that it was expected that they would graduate high school. Even the few that said that it wasn't expected, displayed personal determination to do so. Yet, many of the participants gave very standard, less than heartfelt answers regarding the purpose of education. On one hand, this is to be expected from teenagers, on the other hand, the participants from the Youth Court focus group demonstrated much more individualized responses to most of the questions. There were striking differences between this group and the other three.

Of the four groups, Youth Court was composed of youth on a college bound track. These participants projected and articulated positive views of themselves and their opportunities. They demonstrated a sense of empowerment and the ability to say what they really thought without appearing to self-censor. They are currently volunteering in a program and they see this as a means to improve their college applications—they're thinking strategically and are already proactive about creating their futures. The question that remains unanswered is why this group is so much more self-directed then the other groups?

The groups from Canal Alliance, Marin City, and County Community/Phoenix Academy, although varying a bit, shared many of the same perceptions and characteristics. They expressed interest in attending two to four year colleges, yet most of them did not vocalize specific interests or barriers. They were vague about their opportunities and their responses tended to be more general, not detailed.

Specifically, data from the focus groups suggest that barriers to higher education and job training exist for youth such as race, economics, citizenship, cultural views, and language. Although all of these youth were participants in a community program, few of them were aware of how to find information about services and other programs. The largest barrier may be that the youth who most need these services will not seek it out themselves.

Consequently, the youth who have politely expressed the idea that all they have to do is "not mess-up" and things will work out for them, may be the very ones who will most likely experience the barriers that they are reticent to name. Although, we have refrained from labeling any of these youth as "at-risk" because the labels themselves may create greater risk, the youth who aren't able to close the gap between what they are told about their potential to achieve and the barriers to that achievement may be truly at risk.

At the same time, the data also shows that these same groups readily understood the need to have practical skills that will allow them to support themselves as they receive further training and/or education that they can develop into long-term careers. They are well aware that without training and without a high school diploma, they will have difficulty finding decent jobs. Yet, they had no knowledge of services that exist, vocational classes at College of Marin, or other programs that will help them to figure out this aspect of their lives.

The qualitative data drawn from these initial focus groups is significant in that it represents larger patterns and trends in perceptions that are present in each of the demographic areas represented.

Further study is needed:
- To collect more in-depth understanding of the impact of each of the barriers mentioned: race, economics, citizenship, cultural views, and language.

- To develop successful models for outreach to youth who are not seeking or using the resources that are currently available. How can we help these youth feel included in their community and that their educational success or failure is not just their own responsibility.

- To determine why youth are not more familiar with the resources available to them, and what can be done to improve that situation (particularly as related to vocational resources). How can county agencies such as Marin Employment Connection help to facilitate the connection between apprenticeship programs and youth who are interested in learning a vocational skill?
    - o For example College of Marin has a federal vocational program, TechPREP, that encourages youth "to begin training and planning for your career while in high school." This is an established partnership between local high schools and COM that none of the focus group participants seemed aware of. In addition, COM also has two year programs in court reporting, nursing, medical assisting, dental assisting, and phlebotomy. Those are valuable pathways to consider. COM also offers Microsoft Training and Certification center, so students can prove their competency with computers and receive Microsoft certification.
    - o To determine the best methods/vehicles for getting this information to the youth that are not seeking it out themselves? How do we get this message to the youth that need it the most? Centralization of information regarding existing services and programs. More outreach is needed. What is the best way to market to youth?

- To research views of different career/vocational paths. There may be many inaccurate assumptions about salaries related to these jobs that are tied into elitist and outdated social standings.
    - o As 67% of the interviewees were interested in attaining trade or work certificates the WIB could develop a work sheet showing the annual salary of the vocational jobs youth identified, as well as the average housing cost and other living expenses in Marin County.

- To assess success of grassroots programs such as the Marin City Golden Gate Residents Council Youth Employment Group and how to better support these efforts. Can we duplicate this model in other areas?

- Regarding how WIB might launch an initiative/campaign to raise youth image in the community: how youth see themselves and how the community sees them. Help break down stereotypes both of self and others.

Initial Steps:
- WIB to:
    - o Establish priorities and time frame.
    - o Identify relevant partners for initiatives.
    - o Communicate impact of youth perception on social and economic issues.
- The Service-Learning Program at Dominican University of California will expand on current efforts to pilot a Youth Empowerment and Equity Project. In conjunction with community partner organizations, county agencies, and school districts DU will build on and increase current service-learning course work. Foci will include:

- Tutoring and mentoring: After-school programs such as Making Waves, Canal Alliance, County Community Probation.
- Youth to Campus: Work with High school students to gain exposure to college opportunities. One-on-one assistance with college exploration, applications, financial aid, etc.
- Flagship programs focusing on dissolving barriers of stereotypes, institutionalized racism and self-segregation, repetition of destructive behavior based on negative self-image and expectations: A oral history project that the group in partnership with Listening for Change.

Data Collection Procedures

The four focus groups were facilitated by two trained adults (each facilitated two of the groups) who followed a protocol developed by the Professional Services Department at the Youth Leadership Institute in San Rafael. The protocol used by facilitators was designed to help them create a productive discussion by youth about a variety of topics related to education in their community. It presents instructions with brief supporting rationales for the ways in which facilitators should promote consistently rational, honest, and systematic deliberation across focus groups that reflect responses from all participants.

Consequently, discussion from focus groups reflected meaningful insights about youth perceptions regarding education. The remainder of this section briefly considers, in turn, 3 key features of the protocol—approach to facilitation, informed consent and confidentiality, and questions posed to youth. Instructions associated with each feature are also described along with supporting rationales to further explain how facilitators and youth participants engaged in discussion useful for this report.

Approach to facilitation

Protocol instructions helped facilitators by providing information that would aid their efforts to promote systematic, comprehensive discussion by establishing an environment of respect and open-mindedness. With that in mind, three types of information were offered to support facilitators:

- Introductory: Facilitators were instructed to begin activities by introducing themselves and stating what organization they represent. Afterward, they were to state the purpose for the focus group and make clear the importance of youth participation. Next, they were to offer appreciation for the effort of youth to attend and communicate respect for views youth would share during the upcoming discussion (see 'informed consent and confidentiality' later in this section).

- Procedural: After the introduction, facilitators were instructed to make clear group expectations for the upcoming discussion by stating that: all opinions were important; there were no wrong or right answers; and it was the responsibility of all participants to develop a set of acceptable rules for behavior. Afterward, facilitators began to pose questions to youth using questions specified in the protocol (see 'Youth Focus Group Questions' later in this section).

- Organizational: Three strategies were specified in the protocol to help facilitators make focus group activities as efficient and productive as possible:
  - Facilitators were asked to use a roundtable approach by asking youth to sit in a circle and then give each of them enough time to respond to each question while moving along the circle in the same order.
  - Facilitators reviewed a document entitled "Guidelines for Interviews & Focus Groups" for helpful hints on: how to probe for additional information during discussions without asking leading questions; and effective methods for re-focusing participants who tray from a specific topic during the discussion.
  - 3 – 4 investigators were present at all focus groups to document youth participants. Youth answers were tracked and notes taken verbatim. Investigators and facilitators also interchanged roles and participated in all facets of this project, adding cohesion and fact-checking capacity.

Informed consent and confidentiality

Protocol instructions required facilitators to communicate during the introduction for focus group activities that productive discussion would result from informed consent with assurances that confidentiality would be maintained afterward. Facilitators explained informed consent by stating that participation was voluntary and no one had to answer any question that resulted in feelings of discomfort. They also explained that confidentiality would be maintained because:

- Participants were not allowed to discuss focus group activities with non-participants.
- Facilitators were only allowed to discuss focus group activities with members of the evaluation team.
- Views expressed during focus group activities that are the basis for findings in this report could not be linked to individual youth when presenting them because no reference would be made to the names of participants or any other individual characteristic, such as gender or ethnicity, that might distinguish them from one another.

Questions posed to youth: Focus group participants were asked eight primary questions by facilitators that are specified in the protocol to promote consistent, systematic discussion among youth across focus groups to elicit their perceptions around issues of educational equity and their own potential to achieve their educational and career goals.

1. **Is it expected in your family that you will graduate high school?** Probes: Get further education or training after high school? Is there anyone else who motivates/expects you to graduate high school? Why do you think some people do not graduate from high school?

2. **What is the purpose/benefit of going to school?** Probe: Why are you in school now? Do you give 100% when go you? Why/why not? What are you learning now that interests you? What kind of jobs do you think you can get with a high school diploma?

3. **Do you think that everyone has access to college or further educational training?** Probe: Why or why not?

4. **Who do you think goes to college or continues their education?** Probe: Why them?

5. **If you could learn a trade or acquire a work certificate in a specific skill area while in high school would you want to do this?** Probe: If so, what trade/job skill? What potential/skills do you currently have? Do you have a job now? If so, would you like to continue educating yourself in this field?)

6. **Do you have any career plans after high school (graduation)?** Probe: Do you see yourself going to college? If so, do you plan on attending a 2yr or 4yr college? If not, do you have any other plans? Are you getting help with or support on options besides college? If there was a high school program to help you get into college would you take it? (ie. classes on the application process)

7. **Where do you see yourself in 5 years?** Probe: Do you see yourself in Marin, California, or another state or country? Why or why not? Do you see any limitations, by self or others?

8. **What services/programs are you aware of in this county to help you achieve your goals?** Probe: Do you feel that your needs are being or will be met?

Data Management and Analysis Procedures

All of the written responses that the recorders had tracked for each group were compiled. These transcriptions were then entered into a spreadsheet for data management and analysis. Data analyses are qualitative and their purpose is to identify common themes, concepts, and issues reflected in youth discussion around their educational needs and perceptions.

Analyses were conducted by using the spreadsheet to sort responses by each question posed to youth to identify trends across focus groups. Responses were sorted further for each question by demographic characteristics to identify factors that might influence perceptions about a specific topic. With that in mind, 4 types of analyses are presented in this report:

- Demographic characteristics are presented in an effort to describe the sample of youth who participated in focus group discussions (see the next section entitled 'Focus Group Sample').
- Findings are presented and then interpreted for Questions 3 and 4, in particular to get at the underlying issues. Answers were examined further by demographic characteristics in instances where they are associated with different perceptions among youth (see the sub-section entitled 'Access and Barriers to Post-Secondary Education/Training' in the section entitled 'Findings and Interpretation.')
- Findings are presented for Question 5; we grouped answers according to interests stated. Answers were examined further by demographic characteristics in instances where they are associated with different perceptions among youth (see the sub-section entitled 'Desire for Vocational Training/Internships at high school level' in the section entitled 'Findings and Interpretation.')
- Findings for Question 8 were fairly straightforward. (see the sub-section entitled 'Limited knowledge of existing programs in the county' section titled 'Findings and Interpretation.')

Focus Group Sample
The purpose of the sample for this report was to produce viewpoints during discussion from youth who are diverse and representative of this county. To that end, voluntary participation was solicited in four different youth oriented organizations in Marin County.
Participants:
6-7 youth in each group/ four groups total/ 27 total participants.
11 female, 16 male
11 Latino, 7 African American, 6 Caucasian, 2 Bi-racial, 1 Native American
The youth were participants in the following programs:
- **YMCA Youth Court:** The Marin County Youth Court is a student forum in Marin County for the diversion of juvenile offenders. The court (1) helps troubled youth change negative patterns into more appropriate and productive forms of behavior; (2) holds youth accountable for their conduct and teaches community accountability; and (3) provides a meaningful volunteer opportunity for additional youth, many of whom are low-income and are "at-risk".

- **County Community School/Phoenix Academy:** *Students of the Marin County Community School are those who have demonstrated the need for a small, highly supportive and closely supervised educational environment by their behavior and/or attendance. Phoenix Academy is a school community committed to providing academic and therapeutic services for adolescents to achieve and maintain sobriety and to develop life-long learning.*

- **Canal Alliance High School Academic Intensive After-School Program:** *This program serves 40 students who formally apply and commit to participating four days a week and/or attend on a drop-in basis. The academic projects, group lessons, and tutoring help students focus on graduation, higher education, and leadership.*

- **Marin City Golden Gate Village Resident's Council Youth Employment Program:** *An 8 week paid internship program offered to teens that provides Marin City youth the opportunity to receive training and to experience a position of responsibility that contributes to the betterment of their community.*

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Table 1 (Appendix A, p.13) presents demographic characteristics of youth participants in focus groups. Percentages in the table refer to the proportion of youth by age, gender, ethnicity, grade, and school. Percentages are presented for youth overall, as shown in the total column.

Data in Table 1 clearly show that youth participants:

- Ranged in age from 13 to 18 years and were mostly between the ages of 14 and 16 (70.4%)
- Were almost just as likely to be female (44.44%) as male (55.56%)
- Were enrolled in grade levels ranging from 8th to 12th, but were predominately in 9th through 11th grade (74.7%)
- Were predominately Latino (41%) and African American (26%).

Meaningful insights regarding youth perceptions of their educational opportunities and needs can be drawn from this data as the nature of focus groups is social rather than individual. This signifies that although the sample is small, the qualitative findings do reflect collective experiences, socially conditioned responses, and common issues of the larger youth populations that each of these groups represent. The purpose was to identify trends in youth perception that "paint a portrait of combined local perspectives." Focus groups elicit qualitative data that "illuminates local perspectives in rich detail," reporting actual statements from real people (from "Focus Group Fundamentals" a methodology brief published by Iowa State University).

It should be noted that although all the groups exhibited a fair amount of positive self-views, the Youth Court group is substantially different in their ability to articulate their perceptions and their understanding of their individual opportunities. Although this group had the greatest number of Caucasian participants, they all attend public schools and are peers with many of the youth from the other groups.

Findings and Interpretation

This section presents findings from discussion by youth regarding their educational opportunities into 3 major themes:

1.) Access and Barriers to Post-Secondary Education/Training (Questions 3 & 4, see Table 2, p.14).
2.) Desire for Vocational Training/Internships at high school level (Question 5, see Table 3, p.15).
3.) Limited knowledge of existing programs in the county (Question 8, see Table 4, p.15).

Each sub-section identified above begins by presenting findings for overall perceptions. Next findings are broken down into significant data based on youth profile or other relevant categories. Findings are then summarized and interpreted to begin the process of synthesizing them into a coherent narrative that identifies key themes around youth perceptions regarding their educational and career opportunities in this county.

Access and Barriers to Post-Secondary Education/Training (Questions 3 & 4)
This section reports findings on youth perceptions about access and barriers to higher education and work related training in their community. Participants were asked about who has access to college (Question 3) and who they think goes to college (Question 4).

Findings: In response to **Question 3:** ***"Do you think that everyone has access to college or further educational training? Why or why not?"***
Range of answers:

"Yes, but I think the standards for scholarships should be lowered. You have to be pretty majestic to get one."
"No, I don't think so. I don't know if I'm gonna go to college, I want to. I just don't have the information. I don't know anything about that."

"Maybe. Because many times their parents tell them to get a job after they finish high school to help them. Most of the times that's why they can't go to college. They say I'm old and I need help and now you have to do the job."

- 67% said no, not everyone can go to college.
- 26% of these responses came from Canal Alliance (CA). County Community (CC) participants and Marin City (MC) participants each contributed 15% of the "no" responses.
- 11% of the "no's" came from Youth Court (YC).

    Barriers that emerged:
- 67% said that economics, class, and race are barriers to further education.
- 19% said that lack of performance and lack of information were key barriers to further education.

Findings: In response to **Question 4: "Who do you think goes to college or continues their education?"**

Typical answer: *"Rich people, smart, athletic, people who get good grades."*

- 81% said that "anyone" can go to college.
- At the same time 41% qualified the idea of anyone as "anyone wealthy."
- When asked who do they think goes to college, CA, CC, and MC did not articulate beyond "anyone wealthy." It was only YC who articulated the other characteristics present in the graph.

Summary and Interpretation: The findings show there is a major discrepancy between the answers to these two questions that were aimed in a similar direction yet posed differently. The access question elicited a fairly negative response. Yet, when asked about what kind of person goes to college, which implies that they have access, the resounding answer was that "anyone can go to college." In analyzing this answer, the barriers then emerged as most of the youth later qualified this as "anyone without barriers of race, class, and economics."

    There was also an interesting difference between the Youth Court group and the other three. The participants from YC were better able to articulate due to better understanding and feelings of inclusion in the community. In the three other groups, the concern is primarily money and race yet they do not verbalize why these are obstacles. The Youth Court participants were more aware of barriers and access due to economics and race. The under-resourced groups reported that economics and race are barriers, yet they were not able to articulate clearly *who* can go to college. Youth Court participants were more consistent in their answers. They didn't exhibit the disconnect that was a common thread between the MC, CC, and CA groups.

    Youth Court articulated enabling factors such as wealth, athletic ability, talent, hard work, intelligence, and expectations. It may be that they feel more comfortable to express their views as they

have a sense of inclusion in the wider social network. At the same time, they were the one group able to specify the factors/characteristics that affect who goes to college such as ethnicity, expectations, family history of higher education.

The other 3 groups exhibited more reticence in voicing their thoughts. (We can speculate the cultural characteristics of the investigators may have been barriers to eliciting straightforward responses. If this is so, it illustrates the power dynamics implicit in racial, cultural, and social roles that come into play during many of the interactions that these youth have outside of their own community) MC, CC, and CA contradicted themselves by answering that "anyone can go to college" and the noting all the barriers for themselves personally. As if they don't consider themselves "anyone." This indicates that despite being repeatedly told that anyone can go to college, their own experience and reality may make them feel less sure about themselves.

In a sense, these three groups all repeated the "party-line" that anything is possible as long as you work hard and apply yourself. (Even many of the youth who at-risk of not finishing high school still talked about college.) They all appeared to have some positive role models: older siblings/relatives, or encouragement from parents, or spoke of their own will to succeed yet a deeper interpretation of their answers revealed a reality full of many other factors that seemed beyond their power to control;

"You can probably get a loan and pay it off later like they say on TV.
[Do you know where to get college information?] No, I don't know."
—County Community School student

"Not everybody [has access to college] because some don't have papers, some drop out, and some have to work for their family. They don't have a choice." –-Canal Alliance youth

Desire for Vocational Training/Internships at high school level (Question 5)
This section reports findings on youth perceptions about their desire to receive vocational/practical skill training while in high school.

Findings: In response to **Question 5: "If you could learn a trade or acquire a work certificate in a specific skill area while in high school, would you want to do this?"**

- 67% were interested in attaining trade or work certificates and approximately 30% were interested in an internship while in high school.
- CA, CC, and MC were the groups that displayed the greatest interest in vocational job training, whereas YC expressed/voiced more interested in internships versus work certificates. YC perceptions accounted for 3% of this interest, as only one participant of this group considered vocational training as an option.
- 17 out of the 20 students that made up MC, CC, and CA expressed interest in vocational training.

Examples of interests for vocational training:
- Computers/Technology
- Mechanics
- Construction/Electrician
- Service/Retail
- Cosmetology

Examples of interests in internships:
- Politics/Law
- Health/Medical
- Fashion

Summary and Interpretation: Once the idea of trade certificates came up, the CC, MC, and CA participants were able to voice their interests or passions in a way they had not been able to articulate about college. On the other hand, YC participants had no idea what work certificates even were and had limited understanding of vocational training, as they were already focused on careers that require college education. Youth Court participants also had very specific career paths in mind, lawyer, psychologist, astronaut etc. There was more interest in health fields at Canal Alliance: midwife, nursing

Limited knowledge of existing programs in the county

Findings: In response to **Question 8, "What services/programs are you aware of in this county to help you achieve your goals?"**

The good news is that these students are all engaged in at least one program:

"Canal Alliance. Today I am going to do my homework and before I didn't do my homework because I didn't like it and now I do and my grades are going up and that's because I didn't like it and now I do and my grades are going up and that's because Canal Alliance helped me."

- 67% said they were not aware of services other than the one they were currently in.
- The 33% that were aware of services were from the Youth Court and Canal Alliance groups.
- Zero participants in Marin City had knowledge of services outside their community.
- When probed, some responded with ways they would like to receive information or have received it effectively:
    - 15% - Family/Friends
    - 22% - High School
    - 4% - Counselors
    - 19% - Internet/Brochures/Flyers/Newspapers
    - 8% - Community service/ Leadership Opps
    - 7% - College Career Center

Summary and Interpretation
Some of the participants were vaguely aware that there are programs and services available to them, especially through their schools, but did not seem familiar with them or able to offer the names of these services. Their lack of specific knowledge or first-hand experience with these programs may indicate these students are not considered to be on the college track, or because they don't view themselves in this way, they are not actively seeking out information about college. There are other programs offered to help them receive job skills training, tutoring etc. but again, nothing jumped out other than the program that was sponsoring the focus group itself.

  The students mentioned ways they have received or would like to receive information when probed, but not all the students were probed with the same questions (ie. What ways would you like to receive information? or What ways have you received information effectively?). They responded that family and friends, high school, counselors, internet/brochures/flyers/newspapers, community service/leadership opportunities, or a college career center were good resources for them to learn about college or career options. It is interesting to note that the ones who were aware of services and programs, especially the ones they were involved in, had heard about these from friends and family. The Canal Alliance and Marin City youth benefited from network within their own neighborhood communities.

  When the Canal Alliance participants were asked if there were any other services that would be useful, they responded that they would like more programs like Canal Alliance because it has benefited their education.

  It was also apparent that the youth involved in the Marin City Golden Gate Village Resident's Council Youth Employment Program felt good about the opportunity that this was providing them to learn responsibility for a specific set of duties that also contributed to the betterment of their community center. Unfortunately, they have had to reduce their 12 week program to 8 weeks due to limited resources.

<center>**Conclusions**</center>

As stated in the overview, the focus groups revealed an interesting schism between what youth articulate about their opportunities and their underlying perceptions of barriers and the fact that they are unaware of how to access the information that they need or even know to look for these resources. Findings to support these Findings to support these contentions are evident in discussion by participants, and there are implications for addressing the perceptions and career/college opportunities in the community.

With that in mind, the remainder of this section supports discussion in the overview by summarizing key findings and the conclusions drawn from them. Afterwards, discussion in the overview is reinforced further by a brief summary of next steps that are framed by findings and conclusions.

Key findings:
Information obtained from focus group discussion is not definitive, but it is useful for thinking about…

- **Predominantly youth expressed a positive attitude about themselves and their futures in their initial responses but follow-up probes often produced deeper issues.** Although all the youth participants exhibited positive goals: they want to graduate high school and go on to college or receive professional training, at the same time they expressed frustrations with obstacles and barriers. Much of this positive language that the Canal Alliance, County Community/Phoenix Academy, and Marin City groups used appeared to be less their own than that of the Youth Court group. Their positive answers were often pretty pat and the words did not seem part of the rest of their vocabulary. Using similar questions posed slightly differently answers and probes revealed a few contradictory responses:
    - These three groups do perceive and experience barriers of race and economics but are less comfortable or do not have the language to articulate these. In a sense, they do not feel empowered to do so. They do not feel the permission to even own the language in the way that the Youth Court group did. We hesitate to say that this is due to the Youth Court group's sense of entitlement as many of them do not come from privileged backgrounds.
    - Instead of mentioning race and economics as barriers, these groups more willingly express lack of performance as a barrier. People who are "on track" are successful in high school and get into college. They talk about getting distracted, not applying themselves, and feeling overwhelmed. In a sense, they seem to believe that the sole responsibility lies with them to overcome their own barriers. This is a heavy burden and it may well not be the whole truth of their situation. Whether or not they completely believe that being personally pro-active is the key to success is not clear but it is certainly the dominant paradigm that they express.
- **Youth participants expressed great interest in attaining practical vocational skills in addition to already taking college prep courses while in high school.** Youth see a need to graduate high school with some practical skills that may become a long-term career or may become a means to support themselves while attending college or receiving other professional training.
    - This positive response from the youth participants can be interpreted as a positive and a negative. It is positive that these youth have a desire for practical skills with which they can support themselves. At the same time, is this because they don't find it feasible that they will be able to attend college or further their education? This also requires more study. Many deeper questions emerge as we think about the implied social values associated with vocational versus the higher education track.
    - It is of note that the Youth Court participants, who spoke of Ivy League university destinations, didn't even understand the question. This shows a schism between the perceptions of the Youth Court participants and the other three groups. This leads to the question: Why do the YC participants not see the need for practical skills and only have the vision of higher education?

- **This county appears to offer many services that the youth could benefit from, yet they currently know little about.**
  - The County Community/Phoenix Academy group knew about School to Career and one of the seven was in the program. Most of them knew about Regional Occupational Programs as they offered computer classes at their school.
  - Although many expressed interest in the concept and many currently hold jobs, none of the kids were aware that there are ways that they could take classes and receive vocational training at College of Marin while in high school.
  - Even though a few participants were able to mention some programs, most or all of these were listed only once by a participant. They had vague knowledge that there are programs available, but they are obviously not accessing them.
  - Also of note, when asked what services are available, they regarded their own behavior, activities, as either helping or hindering them on a college track. They did not cite the community as obligated to respond to their needs. They are told and are made to feel that as long as they stay focused, work hard, don't mess up, basically, if do everything right, then they will succeed. Even for the highly ambitious Youth Court group this may prove to be untrue.

Next steps should include:
Information obtained from focus group discussion is not definitive, but it is useful
for thinking about the youth experience and the gulf that many experience between themselves and community resources.
Specifically, key findings summarized above and the conclusions drawn from them
suggest the focus for next steps should be on collecting more evidence about how to better assist youth who are not positioned to self-initiate this process.

Those steps are described in greater detail in the overview and they might be:

- Further study regarding youth perceptions and impact of barriers such as economics/class, race, low performance.

- Research issues of empowerment. How do youth develop the security and the ability to articulate opinions and needs in order to develop more specific and informed future plans and choices? Develop initiatives in response.

- Develop outreach to raise youth awareness, self-image, and knowledge of existing programs, especially vocational training opportunities and pathways to higher education.

- Address (mis)perceptions of vocational or trade occupations as somehow having less social value and as limits to an individual's ability to flourish intellectually and as an active citizen in the community.

APPENDIX A. Table 1: Profile for Sample of Youth Participants by Group

Youth Trait	Total n = 27	Canal Alliance n = 7	County Comm n = 7	Marin City n = 6	Youth Court n = 7
Age in Years					
% 13 yrs	7.41%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	7.41%
n =	2	0	0	0	2
% 14 yrs	18.52%	3.70%	3.70%	7.41%	3.70%
n =	5	1	1	2	1
% 15 yrs	29.63%	11.11%	3.70%	7.41%	7.41%
n =	8	3	1	2	2
% 16 yrs	22.22%	0.00%	7.41%	7.41%	7.41%
n =	6	0	2	2	2
% 17 yrs	14.81%	3.70%	11.11%	0.00%	0.00%
n =	4	1	3	0	0
% 18 yrs	7.41%	7.41%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
n =	2	2	0	0	0
Gender					
% Female	44.44%	14.81%	3.70%	14.81%	11.11%
n =	12	4	1	4	3
% Male	55.56%	11.11%	22.22%	7.41%	14.81%
n =	15	3	6	2	4
Ethnicity					
African-American	25.93%	0.00%	7.41%	18.52%	0.00%
n =	7	0	2	5	0
Native Alaskan	3.70%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	3.70%
n =	1	0	0	0	1
Bi-Racial	7.41%	0.00%	0.00%	3.70%	3.70%
n =	2	0	0	1	1
Caucasian	22.22%	0.00%	7.41%	0.00%	14.81%
n =	6	0	2	0	4
Latino	40.74%	25.93%	11.11%	0.00%	3.70%
n =	11	7	3	0	1
Grade					
8th	14.81%	0.00%	0.00%	3.70%	11.11%
n =	4	0	0	1	3
9th	33.33%	7.41%	7.41%	14.81%	3.70%
n =	9	2	2	4	1
10th	18.52%	7.41%	0.00%	0.00%	11.11%
n =	5	2	0	0	3
11th	22.22%	7.41%	11.11%	3.70%	0.00%
n =	6	2	3	1	0
12th	11.11%	3.70%	7.41%	0.00%	0.00%
n =	3	1	2	0	0
School					
Braun High Sch	3.70%	3.70%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
n =	1	1	0	0	0
County & Community	22.22%	0.00%	22.22%	0.00%	0.00%
n =	6	0	6	0	0
Davidson Middle Sch	7.41%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	7.41%
n =	2	0	0	0	2
Marin Horizon	3.70%	0.00%	0.00%	3.70%	0.00%
n =	1	0	0	1	0
Phoenix	3.70%	0.00%	3.70%	0.00%	0.00%
n =	1	0	1	0	0
Redwood High	3.70%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	3.70%
n =	1	0	0	0	1
San Jose Middle Sch	3.70%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	3.70%
n =	1	0	0	0	1
San Rafael High	22.22%	22.22%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
n =	6	6	0	0	0
Tam High School	18.52%	0.00%		18.52%	0.00%
n =	5	0	0	5	0
Terra Linda HS	11.11%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	11.11%
n =	3	0	0	0	3

APPENDIX B. Table 2: Percentages for Questions 3, 4, 5

Table 2: Percentages for Questions 3, 4, 5 (Cont.)

APPENDIX C. Table 3: Percentages for Question 8