

# Enriching Summer Work:

An Evaluation  
of the  
Summer  
Career  
Exploration  
Program



Wendy S. McClanahan • Cynthia L. Sipe • Thomas J. Smith

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Public/Private Ventures is a national nonprofit organization that seeks to improve the effectiveness of social policies and programs. P/PV designs, tests and studies initiatives that increase supports, skills and opportunities of residents of low-income communities; works with policymakers to see that the lessons and evidence produced are reflected in policy; and provides training, technical assistance and learning opportunities to practitioners based on documented effective practices.

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The report is the culmination of five years of work by many individuals and organizations. Thanks go to all of the agencies that implemented SCEP in Summer 1999 and those that participated in the implementation study in Summer 1998. In addition to providing a valuable service to Philadelphia youth, these agencies and their staffs endured the demands of the long, in-depth research process. They recruited additional youth, hosted site visits, organized focus groups, implemented random assignments and surveyed youth. Their dedication cannot be underestimated.

The Philadelphia Foundation also played a critical role in the research process. Mark Gifford and his staff managed the sites expertly and provided P/PV with needed support. Branch Associates conducted the implementation study, which provided much of the descriptive information contained in this report. The William Penn Foundation and its staff also provided critical support for P/PV. And Abt Associates implemented the random assignment process and the follow-up surveys.

P/PV staff were also integral to the project. Patricia Ma worked on the project in its early years. Joseph Tierney, former vice president and director of Philadelphia initiatives, also supported our work on the evaluation and reviewed drafts of the report. Karen Walker, Mark Elliott and Jean Grossman all reviewed the report, as did members of P/PV's board of directors. Dr. Alan Krueger gave suggestions for follow-up analyses, and Gary Walker wrote the Executive Summary.

Audrey Walmsley, executive administrative assistant at P/PV, was critical to the project's success. She assured smooth communication between P/PV and the sites, and between P/PV and Abt. Eleanor Hammond and Chrissy Labs were responsible for data management. Sarah Pepper and Shawn Bauldry expertly analyzed the study's data. Jana Moore edited an early version of the report, and Maxine Sherman and Joanne Camas did the final editing and copyediting. Chelsea Farley organized the production of the report, and Malish & Pagonis designed it.



## Executive Summary

Summer jobs programs were one of this country's earliest publicly funded attempts to assist youth who live in communities with few economic resources (and thus few job opportunities). They were also one of our most enduring social programs, having distinct legislative authorization and funding for almost 30 years—up to the mid-1990s. Even now, these programs are allowable costs under the federal Workforce Investment Act.

Through the 1970s and much of the 1980s, the importance of publicly subsidized summer jobs was rarely questioned. They provided an experience many youth could not obtain in their neighborhoods; they also reduced the idle time teenagers had in the summer months, presumably reducing crime, drug use and other undesirable activities. Several major efforts were initiated in the 1980s to add educational programming to summer jobs programs, with the intention of improving literacy and subsequent school performance as well.

A number of factors converged in the late 1980s and early 1990s to cast doubt on the utility of public summer jobs programs. One was a concern, often backed with vivid examples, that public and nonprofit sector jobs were simply not good work experiences. In short, they were a poor foundation for the “real” world of work that youth would soon encounter.

Another factor was long-term impact evidence from national demonstrations such as the Summer Training and Education Program (STEP). STEP's results indicated that well-implemented summer jobs programs with strong educational and life skills components do indeed improve skills, literacy and knowledge over the short run—but that those gains do not endure. Participants did not graduate high school at higher rates, have fewer pregnancies or get better grades; the positive results from a summer's (or even two summers') programming simply evaporated over the succeeding several years (Walker and Vilella-Velez, 1992).

In the 1990s, the economy began to boom, and the reasons for a distinct and well-funded summer jobs program were further weakened. Today there is no distinct summer jobs program; federal funding is only allowed if the program is part of a year-round youth initiative.



## The Summer Career Exploration Program (SCEP)

Some jurisdictions have persisted in their conviction that a distinct summer jobs program has important benefits for youth and have shaped programs that take account of the criticisms and shortcomings of earlier federal summer jobs initiatives. Philadelphia's Summer Career Exploration Program (SCEP) is one such effort.

Established in 1983 by the William Penn Foundation and currently supported by a collaborative of local philanthropic and corporate funders, SCEP provides only private-sector summer work experiences for more than 1,500 low-income teens who have completed the tenth grade in Philadelphia and Delaware counties in Pennsylvania, and Camden, New Jersey. Participants work in a career of their choice for 25 hours per week, for about six weeks. The program's philanthropic supporters cover 80 percent of the participants' salaries; employers cover the remaining 20 percent. SCEP focuses on meeting the career interests of participating youth in their summer jobs. Through information, field visits and college student mentors, SCEP tries to instill and deepen youth's interest in going to college. No public funding is used.

In the late 1990s, the William Penn Foundation asked P/PV to evaluate SCEP. The program had been operating for 15 years and had worked through the usual operational glitches and hurdles. It had strong support from business, philanthropic and community leaders. This was a good time to conduct a rigorous outside look at SCEP's design, implementation and impacts.

## The Evaluation

The first phase of the study examined the program's operation—both adherence to program design and quality of actual implementation. P/PV's experience is that such a phase is critical to ensure that the impact study asks the right questions, to assist in interpreting the later results, and—perhaps most important—to assess whether implementation is sound enough, in both quality and theory of action, to justify proceeding with an impact evaluation.

Thus, P/PV studied a large sample (15) of the existing sites (28), and included a representation of the various kinds of organizations that operated SCEP—Boys & Girls Clubs, local community-based organizations, a metropolitan-wide social service agency and a local intermediary. P/PV used a standard instrument to examine implementation quality.

We found that implementation was strong in most areas. Conformance to design and theory of action were also strong. Where there were weaknesses or specific improvements needed, local organizations were either already aware of or already resolving the problems, or were open to discussing the problems and possible solutions.

SCEP's 15 years of experience, reliable funding partners and strong, involved support and oversight from the philanthropic and private sectors had produced a well-implemented program. It was suitable and ready for an impact evaluation to determine if it could reach its goals: to increase educational aspirations and a positive work orientation among its participants, and to produce concrete manifestations of those increases within 12 months.

## Impact Findings

**The first major impact finding was positive, notable and large—namely, as Table 1 indicates, that SCEP's participants got summer jobs at a substantially higher rate (92%) than the control group (62%).** The participants and controls were randomly selected from a large group of eligible SCEP applicants. The economy was strong that summer, and it appeared that the availability of SCEP was the determining factor in providing a desirable work experience to youth from poor families and neighborhoods.

Since there is some evidence that early job experiences are an important factor in educational attainment and adult labor market success, this large impact on the rates of work experience in well-implemented private sector jobs bodes well for SCEP's utility and effectiveness, and its case for sustainability.

**But SCEP's ability to translate this large and immediate summer employment impact into intermediate gains regarding future plans and intentions, college enrollment and work success, sense of self-efficacy and reduced criminal activity proved to be negligible.** As Tables 2 and 3 show, SCEP had no perceptible impact, positive or negative, in any of these areas. For example, 78 percent of participants said after

**Table 1**  
SCEP Employment Outcomes

Outcome Measure	Participants	Controls
Percentage employed over the summer***	92%	62%
Average hourly wage at SCEP or main summer job**	\$5.30	\$5.69
Average summer earnings (both employed and unemployed youth)**	\$694.87	\$446.74
Mean total hours worked by those employed	179	173

\*\* Statistically significant at the .01 level.

\*\*\* Statistically significant at the .001 level.

**Table 2**  
SCEP Post-Program Academic and Work Orientation Impacts: Selected Measures

Academic Measures	Participants	Controls
Planned to attend college	78%	81%
Enrolled in a college preparatory curriculum**	12%	8%
Visited a college campus during school year 1999-2000	45%	42%
Discussed college applications/financial aid with an adult	84%	84%
Obtained sufficient information about college	84%	85%
Work Orientation Measures	Participants	Controls
Mean score "attitude toward work" (from 1, low, to 4, high)	3.36	3.43
Mean score "work readiness" (from 1, low, to 4, high)	3.51	3.51
Mean score "self-efficacy" (from 1, low, to 4, high)	3.51	3.50

\*\* Statistically significant at the .01 level.

**Table 3**  
SCEP Post-Program Employment Impacts

Employment Impacts	Participants	Controls
Percentage who worked during school year 1999-2000	60%	61%
Percentage who worked for their summer employer during the school year***	32%	45%
Average hourly wage earned at school-year job	\$6.12	\$6.13
Average earnings of employed youth during school year 1999-2000	\$2,647	\$2,526

\*\*\* Statistically significant at the .001 level.

their SCEP summer that they intended to go to college; 81 percent of the control group did. Forty-five percent of participants visited a college campus during the school year; 42 percent of the control group did. Work readiness ratings after the summer were 3.51 for participants and 3.51 for controls. Feelings of self-efficacy were 3.51 and 3.50, respectively, and employment rates during the subsequent school year were 60 and 61 percent (with earnings of \$2,647 and \$2,526).

SCEP's only positive impact was in the area of high-school college preparatory courses—12 percent of SCEP participants took them compared with 8 percent of the control group. It is an important area of impact, but the actual difference is modest.

In short, it is difficult to see any substantial evidence of SCEP's impact for the first two years after the SCEP experience. One might argue that the program's effects are delayed, but it is not an especially persuasive argument, since the well-documented pattern of impacts from short-term programs like SCEP is one of gradual deterioration, not growth, over time.

### Implications and Recommendations

One implication that can be drawn from these findings is that the SCEP program is not worth the effort and resources it absorbs. But an equally viable alternative is that the program should be strengthened to increase its impacts. After all, SCEP has a long history and strong support among all sectors, and addresses an area of programming—teenagers, work experience, career exploration and college access—that is poorly supported by public dollars. To abandon SCEP is to abandon the issues SCEP is intended to address, since there is so little programming in this area.

So, how can SCEP be strengthened? It is, as noted earlier, a generally well-implemented program. But our analysis and experience with other evaluations indicates that there are two critical areas where changes would likely increase impacts.

- **First, add a year-round component or link SCEP to school-year activities related to college preparation and career exploration.** Previous evaluations of social programs are consistent in showing how quickly the effects of short-term programs fade. SCEP's six weeks are simply too brief a period to expect a discernible impact on a significant number of students. Selected activities or a longer-term mentoring component interspersed throughout the junior and senior high-school years, showing students that SCEP has a capacity to further their educational and career aspirations, might remedy the situation.

Private sector employers could offer individual and group sessions around careers in their field—information that is not available to most high-school juniors and seniors. Career mentors or the college monitors that SCEP now provides also could be trained to take a more active, practical and sustained role in students' educational achievement and aspirations.

- **Second, target students less likely to succeed on their own.** Without a longer-term intervention, we cannot expect SCEP to benefit its participants beyond the immediate advantage of finding a summer job. However, the students SCEP now attracts are, for the most part, highly motivated to begin with: they are reasonably good students, and a significant percentage have plans to go to college.

Experience indicates that students who can succeed on their own may benefit from an experience like SCEP, but not in ways that demonstrably change or improve their lives. Many students from poor families and neighborhoods achieve quite well in life without special programs—though they may enroll in such programs when they are available. SCEP appears to draw a high proportion of such students.

It is possible that the fact that the program's jobs are in the private sector may tilt SCEP away from the youth who could most benefit from the experience. After all, the price of more significant impacts is also likely to be a higher number of failures. But the philan-

thropic sector does pay for 80 percent of the salaries; the private sector's willingness to take an increased level of risk should be explored.

SCEP's history, support and strengths are, in our judgment, too considerable to abandon, despite the lack of impacts that this study reveals. The recommendations above suggest ways to gain more impact from an already unique and well-implemented program.







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