
The Boy Scouts of America National Foundation
Exploring Summerfest Evaluation

Executive Report of Findings



Principal Investigators

Edmond P. Bowers, Ph.D.

Lincoln R. Larson, Ph.D.

Graduate Assistant

Alexandra M. Sandoval

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the Summer of 2016, the leadership teams from The Boy Scouts of America (BSA) National Foundation and Research and Evaluation expressed an interest in evaluating the experiences of youth and the outcomes associated with participation in the Exploring Summerfest event that occurred from July 27 to July 30, 2016 at the Summit Bechtel Reserve, a High Adventure Camp located near Mt. Hope, West Virginia. BSA National Foundation awarded funding to a research team from Clemson University to conduct this evaluation.

Participants in Exploring Summerfest included youth from existing Exploring Posts and youth from several Housing and Urban Development/Public Housing Authority (HUD) sites. Youth and adult leaders from the HUD sites were provided support for their travel and attendance from the BSA National Foundation. The LFL-HUD partnership provided an unprecedented opportunity for many low-income urban youth to experience Summerfest and the potential benefits it may provide.

The present report reflects the work of a collaboration of scholars from youth development and parks and conservation. Our goal was to examine the role of youth experiences at the 2016 Exploring Summerfest in influencing subsequent youth engagement in Exploring Programs and nature-based experiences, and ultimately, positive youth developmental outcomes. Our specific aims were to:

Specific Aim #1: Investigate youth experiences of Exploring Summerfest in terms of personal growth, connection to nature, adult leaders, and peers, and engagement in activities.

Specific Aim #2: Explore the relations between youth engagement with Exploring and nature-based experiences with changes in positive youth developmental outcomes.

Specific Aim #3: Examine the relations between youth engagement with Exploring and youth career-mindedness, hopeful future expectations, and contribution and leadership in their communities.

This report presents preliminary findings from a longitudinal multi-method, quantitative-qualitative examination of the links between youth experiences of Exploring Summerfest, engagement with Exploring, and youth outcomes including leadership, self-regulation, social and emotional learning skills, character, relationship with nature, career-related motivations and behaviors, and future expectations. The sample for this study (N=156) was recruited from of the 197 youth participants in the Exploring Summerfest event (response rate to at least one survey collection point = 79.1%). The 156 participants were composed of 89 youth from

Exploring posts (58.2%) and 64 youth from HUD sites (41.8%). We collected data from youth participants through quantitative surveys, short-answer qualitative responses, and small group interviews. By triangulating these data sources, we identified several key findings including:

- 1. Youth from Exploring Post and HUD sites did not differ in strengths.** Exploring youth were older than youth from HUD sites and largely of Latino/Hispanic background (as compared to youth from HUD sites who reported being African American or Black). However, youth from Exploring and HUD groups did not differ significantly in terms of gender, grades earned in school, or rates of employment. Over 90% of youth in both groups also reported having a relationship with an important non-parental adult and being involved in several out-of-school time activities. The presence of these strengths in many youth taken together with the lack of differences between the groups could prove advantageous to future research and interventions with these young people.
- 2. All youth were doing well in the outcomes of interest – perhaps too well.** Overall, the sample of youth reported favorable levels of youth outcomes. Youth from HUD sites generally reporting slightly more positive outcomes than Exploring youth in confidence, seeing oneself as a good leader in one's community, decision-making, teamwork, and social skills. However, we express caution with interpretation of these results due to our concerns that youth responses may have been affected by social desirability bias, exhaustion and/or disinterest due to the conditions under which the data were collected, and general positive feelings when reporting on an intensive experience.
- 3. Exploring and HUD youth did differ in career-related cognitions, motivations, and behaviors, and these differences may be linked to the Exploring experience.** Exploring youth had a clearer grasp of career options and paths to achieving those careers. Many of these prospective careers were linked to their current Exploring Post career field. The Exploring youth felt sure of their career goals and interests as well as their knowledge of career decision-making process. Conversely, HUD youth often identified careers with less transparent paths such as athletics and entertainment. Youth in the Exploring program were 8.33 times more likely to identify law enforcement, firefighting, or the military as desired careers than youth from HUD sites whereas youth from HUD sites were over 6 times more likely to identify professional sports and 14 times more likely to identify arts and entertainment as desired careers than youth from Exploring posts.

Youth from HUD sites were more likely to be keeping their options open as they learn about different careers, but they were also likely to doubt they will find a career that suits them. The average youth from a HUD site was 1. more unsure of their future work interests and career goals than 86% of Exploring youth; 2. more doubtful that they would find a suitable career than 83% of Exploring youth; and 3. more open to career options than 69% of Exploring youth. Youth from HUD sites level of career

reconsideration was over a standard deviation higher than Exploring youth scores, and HUD youth expressed having career doubts at a level almost one standard deviation higher than Exploring youth.

Most youth reported that support for their careers came from outside their immediate families with Exploring youth describing a stronger support network. This stronger career-supportive network was reflected in the comparatively high percentage of Exploring youth who participated in out-of-school activities and volunteering experiences to prepare for their careers. Exploring youth were 43% more likely to participate in out-of-school activities to prepare for their careers than youth from HUD sites. They were also 56% more likely to engage in volunteer work to prepare for their careers than youth from HUD sites. In Explorers' support networks, Exploring post advisors and teachers played a key role as compared to other potential source of career counseling. Youth from Exploring sites were 3.82 times more likely to identify these important non-parental adults as key resources for career plans than youth from HUD sites. Explorers indicated that the immersive experiences and structure of Exploring provided them with support from leaders, ignited or stoked their passion, and promoted leadership skills in a particular career path.

- 4. Both Exploring and HUD youth identified similar key characteristics of leadership, and they recognize those characteristics in themselves.** The attributes of good leaders that youth most frequently recognized were the abilities to 1. encourage and support others and promote productive teams; 2. focus on and achieve goals; and 3. serve as a good role model (leading by example). Based on these characteristics, youth overall also saw themselves as leaders in various contexts, with HUD youth especially seeing themselves as good leaders in their community. Youth from Exploring posts highlighted the informal and formal roles they took within Exploring as important to their growth as leaders.
- 5. Exploring Summerfest provided a challenging, engaging, and overall worthwhile experience for youth, reflecting key attributes of positive youth development settings.** Youth reported being highly engaged with and challenged by the activities, which is conducive to initiative (Larson, 2000). In addition youth reported positive relationship with their peers and Summerfest staff. Many youth pointed to the novelty and challenge of the activities, including the benefits of connecting to nature. Youth reported that the Summerfest experience most helped them nurture positive connections and relationships and pushed participants beyond their comfort zones in a positive way. Taken together, youth experiences at Exploring Summerfest are consistent with philosophies to structure positive youth development settings (e.g., Eccles & Gootman, 2002) and indices of quality out-of-school time programs (Vandell, 2013).