

# **Successful Retention Strategies for College Bound:**

*Lessons Learned from Local Youth Development  
Organizations and Boys and Girls Club Participants*

Education 279: Urban Youth and their Institutions

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## Executive Summary

The mission of the Boys and Girls Club of the Peninsula (BGCP) is to guide and inspire youth, and to prepare them for becoming responsible, caring citizens. The BGCP was founded in 1958 as a safe space for kids to socialize and participate in after-school activities. Over the past fifty years, it has established itself as a pioneer in the youth development field because it has successfully provided diverse, engaging programs and nurtured strong peer and staff relationships. The BGCP's work is never complete and it strives constantly to improve, taking steps to close the gap between what youth need and what programs offer. Responding most recently to the peninsula's devastatingly low rates of high school graduation, the BGCP launched a program last August called College Bound to meet the specific academic and social needs of high school students.

Our team began its research as part of a partnership between the BGCP and Stanford University's School of Education. The BGCP was interested in learning more about the reasons why students drop out of school and how programs can help them stay on a successful path to high school graduation, college, and beyond. We worked with Sean Mendy, the coordinator of College Bound, to determine the following primary research questions:

- What specific characteristics of staff, activities, and program atmosphere motivate youth to stay in academic programs? What factors cause students to drop out of programs?
- What are the greatest challenges for academic programs in retaining and supporting youth?
- What successful strategies have youth organizations implemented to keep at-risk high school students engaged in after-school programs and in school?

To answer these questions, we interviewed three local organizations – Stanford College Preparation Program, College Track, and Built to Last Collaborative – and held two focus groups with Boys and Girls Club students, one in East Palo Alto and the other in Redwood City. We also conducted a literature review to gain a perspective on what successful youth development programs look like throughout the nation.

Staff from local organizations and BGC participants provided valuable feedback. We have organized our findings and recommendations into key themes that the BGCP can leverage to increase student participation and retention in the College Bound program.

- **Standards and Expectations:** Academic programs maintained a system of accountability by holding students to high academic standards. When students failed to meet attendance requirements, staff followed up with individual students. We recommend BGCP staff communicate clear expectations and follow-up with students as soon participation drops.
- **Student Involvement:** Students greatly appreciated the BGCP and are likely to remain in programs when they develop meaningful peer and staff relationships, can participate in engaging activities, and view programs as being relevant to future achievements. Student involvement can be heightened by creating opportunities for leadership, helping to make concrete plans for the future, and offering incentives for participation and rewards for jobs well done. We also recommend establishing a student advisory board so that College Bound can shape program elements to ongoing student concerns.
- **Student Involvement:** Students greatly appreciated the BGCP and are likely to remain in programs when they develop meaningful peer and staff relationships, can participate in engaging activities, and view programs as being relevant to future achievements. Student involvement can be heightened by creating opportunities for leadership, helping to make concrete plans for the future, and offering incentives for participation and rewards for jobs well done. We also recommend establishing a student advisory board so that College Bound can shape program elements to ongoing student concerns.
- **Staffing:** Our fieldwork and literature stress the importance of compassionate staff members who can work with students individually, advocate for them, and relate to them. We recommend that the BGCP build on the case-management approach currently utilized to foster caring relationships, manage student attendance, and ensure that students are held to high expectations.
- **Building Networks:** Successful programs are likely to develop partnerships with students' teachers and families in order to have access to their academic records and progress. These organizations were also likely to seek collaboration with outside organizations to garner additional support and resources. By establishing positive relationships with families, schools, and the wider community, College Bound can become a strong presence in youths' lives.
- **Marketing the Program:** Through various recruitment strategies, programs market themselves as academic supports for motivated students of varied achievement levels. We found that academic, recreational, and social aspects of programs all encourage youth to join and remain in the programs. As College Bound grows, we recommend that they market the program to youth that are motivated and want to achieve long-term goals, regardless of academic achievement. Because youth are their strongest advocates, College Bound should also encourage students to invite friends to participate.

## Introduction

Over the past several years, Stanford University Professor Milbrey McLaughlin has developed a partnership with the Boys and Girls Club of the Peninsula for students enrolled in her course titled "Urban Youth and their Institutions" to conduct research on topics relevant to the BGCP. This year the BGCP requested information on high school and youth program dropouts that would enable them to develop retention strategies for their new College Bound Program. College Bound is a BGC program that is designed to help youth plan and prepare for high school and college. First implemented in a Boys and Girls Club in San Pedro in 2002, results show that program participants have significantly higher SAT scores, and high rates of college attendance. This program has been adopted and is being piloted at BGCP during the fall semester of 2008 with ambitions of providing the same high level of support, development of skills and knowledge, and successful results. In order to benefit as many local youth as possible, the BGCP staff expressed interest in the experiences and lessons learned by other local youth development organizations.

As we began planning for our research, our group decided to focus less on why high school youth drop out (a topic on which there is a wealth of information available), and more on why youth remain in academic programs. That is, we were interested in what attracts youth and keeps them engaged. We explored the question both from the perspective of youth development programs to discover what their challenges and successful strategies were, and from that of the BGC youth to discover why they participate in BGCP activities and what they like about the program that keeps them coming. Given that College Bound was still in the early stages of implementation, the main intention of this research project was not to assess the program but rather to find best practices in similar local youth programs that could be applied at the BGCP.

## *Current Status of the BGCP College Bound Program*

The BGCP College Bound program was in its early stages when our team first embarked upon this research. It has been implemented and grown extensively in the past two months. The program structure is now fully established in all three club locations on the peninsula. Active youth participants receive some attention from the College Bound program virtually every afternoon of the week. Thus far the program development has focused on three general areas: academics, special events, and exposure.

For academics, the BGCP offers a safe, quiet environment where students can focus on completing homework, studying, and receiving academic assistance. Tutoring is offered at each BGCP site on a daily basis. College Bound aims to use a case management approach where students attend frequent (at least weekly) meetings with College Bound directors to discuss progress reports, social issues, academic challenges, and seniors work on college applications with specialized coaches from Oracle. Additionally, students are given a high level of support on SAT test preparation. They study SAT preparatory material, go to Stanford for extra test prep tutoring, and receive sponsorship from the BGCP to take the exam.

College Bound hosts special events to promote relationship building within the program and among different clubhouses. An initial event designed to bring high school youth from all of the clubhouses together was a series of workshops centered on college prep, norms, and expectations. This included discussions about college, distribution of school supplies to students, and campus tours. Other events included a College Fair in East Palo Alto and a family event where parents and students established and compared goals related to college plans. College Bound remains open to expanding recruitment plans. Staff constantly consider potential program participants, thinking about what attracts students to the program, and how to get more students to sign up.

Finally, College Bound seeks to expose its students to educational and professional opportunities with off-site field trips at least once a month, visiting offices and particularly attempting to engage in the academic, social, and cultural communities on college campuses. This past semester, College Bound youth attended a Cal's "Raza Day" where they met professors, participated in workshops, and watched performances by student groups. Another trip involved visiting Homestead Technologies, a company that builds websites. The students shadowed an adult partner, worked on homework, and played icebreaker games. A third trip brought youth to Stanford's Graduate School of Business to receive one-on-one tutoring, tour the campus, see dorm rooms, and learn about business school.

## Literature Review

A rich body of literature is available on the subject of youth development program retention that proves relevant to the interests of the Boys and Girls Club. The following section frames our perspective on adolescence as a period defined by extensive changes and opportunities for positive youth development. In this section, we provide an overview of relevant research on out of school youth programming.

### *Framework for Adolescent Development*

Research shows that the period of adolescence, roughly from age 10 to 20, is marked by extensive changes within the individual and his or her social context. Eccles and Gootman (2008) explain that adolescents undergo biological changes as a result of puberty and they expand in cognitive capacities to think about their own and others' psychological needs, to process complex or abstract problems, to reason hypothetically and plan for the future. The social context changes as peer friendships and

sexual relationships become increasingly more important in youths' lives, relationships between parents and adolescents shift, and students transition from junior to senior high school.

### *A Broad Developmental Space*

Changes in adolescents' lives do not occur overnight or in isolation. Pittman, Tolman, and Yohalem consider youth development as a three dimensional space filled by the accumulation of experiences each minute of the day, from early childhood through late adolescence, and across a host of academic, social, cultural, and physical domains (2005). Psychologists also emphasize that youth's developmental outcomes are not situated solely within the individual. Bronfenbrenner (1979) proposes four characteristics of an ecological framework in which children may have positive or negative experiences that influence development: 1) A *primary developmental context* in which children learn new skills and behaviors under the direct guidance of knowledgeable and supportive primary caregivers, 2) A *secondary developmental context* in which children exercise learned patterns of behavior without the previous direct guidance, 3) Third parties strongly affect developmental outcomes as they support the child and their caregivers' activities, 4) Outcomes are influenced by the quality of connections between the contexts of youth's development.

Within this ecological framework, the Boys and Girls Club can be a safe space for youth to exercise developing skills and encounter third party positive support systems. The Clubhouse can become a strong presence in youths' lives by making connections between family, school, and community developmental contexts.

### *Positive Youth Development*

Adolescence is a biological period ripe with opportunities for advancement in physical, cognitive, and social abilities as well as vulnerabilities to risky behaviors and mentalities. Research increasingly supports a positive youth development perspective in which programs focus on how youth develop in healthy ways rather than attempting to manage their problems. Researchers found that skill and competency building programs that focus on preventing specific problem-behaviors can alter adolescents' knowledge and attitudes, but that outcomes are likely to be short-term and often do not change behaviors without a more sustained, comprehensive positive youth development approach (Roth et al., 1998). These types of positive youth development programs foster competency and resilience by helping youth undertake new roles, responsibilities, and challenging experiences and they provide emotional and motivational support to ensure that participants develop positive identities, values, and skills.

### *Vulnerabilities of Low-Income Youth*

Youth growing up in low-income families are particularly vulnerable to stressors that inhibit healthy development. Programs must be sensitive to circumstances that prevent low-income students from participating, and respond with additional supports when students begin to lose motivation. Weiss, Harden and Lauer (2005) specify some of the challenges faced by low-income youth. According to these researchers, when children become adolescents, they inherit responsibilities in providing for the family and are increasingly expected to work, do household chores, and care for siblings. Lack of transportation and concerns about safety further restrain youth from accomplishing daily tasks.

Youth in inner city neighborhoods are particularly at risk for exposure to family or community

violence, inattentive parenting, gang pressures, and encounters with police, juvenile justice, and welfare authorities (Halpern, 2006). Combined, these experiences hinder adolescents' ability to trust others, to succeed in school, maintain motivation and curiosity, and a sense of an open future in which they are self-efficacious individuals (ibid).

### *Effective Retention Strategies*

Amidst dramatic physical, cognitive, and social changes, the pressures of adolescents' development render the job of youth programming extremely challenging. Enrollment is harder to maintain with high school students than elementary or middle school. The increasing importance of peer relationships causes students to prefer hanging out and relaxing with friends than participating in organized activities, which they are inclined to find boring or uninteresting (Weiss, Harden & Lauer 2005). In a study on out-of-school youth programs in New York City, researchers Russell, Mielke, and Reisner (2008) found that youth often drop out of programs or do not attend regularly enough to have an enriching experience. For these reasons, literature on retention strategies of effective youth programs is extensive. The following is an overview of methods to retain at-risk youth that may be useful as the Boys and Girls Club structures their new College Bound program, designs activities, hires staff, and connects with families, schools, and the community.

### *Program Structure*

Elements of program structure that influence youth participation include standards and expectations for attendance, organization of key decision-makers, level of flexibility, and times of operation. First, effective youth programs maintain explicit, transparent expectations for attendance and staff members follow up personally when students do not show up (Weiss, Harden & Lauer 2005). Clear standards about attendance help programs demonstrate to youth that they are committed to their success and that they aim to be a strong presence in their lives. At the same time, programs that are highly inflexible will likely dismay at-risk students that may be hesitant to commit in the first place. Halpern (2006) suggests that programs should be flexible to the community and individuals they serve so that youth do not view programs as authoritative and repressive, but rather sources of encouragement to express themselves and to develop agency and a sense of self-efficacy. Other researchers suggest that one effective strategy for adapting content and schedules to teenagers' desires is to involve older youth in program design and decision-making (Weiss Harden & Lauer). Whether youth are hired on a volunteer basis or as paid interns, the leadership role promotes a higher sense of belonging and responsibility toward the program. Furthermore, decisions made by a collaborative team of involved youth and adults are more likely to be respected by adolescents that may be cynical towards authority.

Moreover, programs can further enhance dedication by providing summer opportunities for youth. The break between school years is unnatural within the perspective of continuous youth development because across a period of months adolescents may risk losing their motivation to continue past activities and pursue academic success. Researchers in New York City found that summer program participation was associated with higher rates of school year attendance (Russell, Mielke, & Reisner, 2008).

## *Program Activities*

Maintaining interest in program activities is a critical difficulty as adolescents are quick to dismiss boring, didactic tasks and are more drawn to social and recreational activities with friends and on the streets. In order to be effective, programs do not have to focus solely on standard academic measures such as test scores and GPAs. They can consider a broad range of cognitive skills like synthesizing information and applying knowledge, and social skills like perseverance, self-discipline, and communication (Halpern, 2008), and enhance such skills in embedded curriculum of activities generally not considered academic such as arts and sports (McLaughlin, 2000). Even when programs offer age-appropriate and diverse activities, some will inevitably be more or less appealing. In order to enhance participation in less desirable activities, research supports the use of positive rewards such as paid apprenticeships, stipends, or point systems in place of punitive treatment for nonparticipation (Martin & Halperin, 2006; Harden, Lauver, & Little, 2005). Programs can also foster a sense of pride and belonging to the program by providing opportunities for students to display skills they have gained through culminating performances, group activities, or exhibitions (Weiss, Harden & Lauver, 2005).

A further difficulty is demonstrating to students that program activities are related to future prospects and outcomes. For this reason, programs must make explicit attempts to show youth that the knowledge and skills developed by embedded curriculum in program activities will prepare them for careers and experiences in their adult lives. For instance, goals of going to college become more tangible when programs lead visits to college campuses and provide college-counseling services (Fashola & Slavin, 1998). Programs may also help arrange employment opportunities for students that are in immediate need of income (Martin & Halperin, 2006). Programs can thus engage high school students by helping them realize the real-world and career-oriented benefits of participation.

## *Staff Qualities*

One fundamental finding is that programs must have compassionate and dedicated staff members. Highly trained and engaged staff members are essential in building relationships with students, teachers, volunteers, and parents (Weiss, Harden & Lauver 2005). The quality of relationships between youth and staff members is a critical factor in determining whether students will continue returning to the program. Youth report desires for positive, close, and informal relationships with staff members that care about their success and make them feel valued (Russell, Mielke & Reisner, 2008; Martin & Halperin, 2006). Researchers have found that out of school programs with young staff members are associated with greater youth participation and that program alumni can make good interns (Russell, Mielke & Reisner, 2008; Weiss, Harden & Lauver, 2005). Perhaps because of their closeness in age and similarity in background, young staff members are able to build strong relationships with adolescents, relate more easily to students' particular interests or struggles, and to avoid being formal figures of authority. Regardless of staff members' age or background, effective programs must require staff members to participate regularly in professional development (Russell, Mielke & Reisner, 2008).

## *Connections to School, Family and the Community*

The concept of youth development as a three dimensional space to be filled illustrates that times of day, ages, and settings are not isolated entities but interwoven venues for youth to have meaningful

experiences (Pittman et al., 2005). Within a continuous developmental space, one important retention strategy is that programs make intentional connections with families, schools, and communities in order to become a strong presence in adolescents' lives.

Programs should communicate with parents or guardians about the benefits of their children being involved such as getting help with homework and tutoring, establishing positive friendships, and gaining opportunities to engage in arts or physical activities (Smink & Reiner, 2005). Hiring caseworkers or parent liaisons to reach out to families through individual meetings, phone calls, and take home materials can help programs maintain youth attendance (Smink & Reiner, 2005; Russell, Mielke & Reisner, 2008). Promoting family literacy can further engage families in monitoring their child's attendance and success in programs and at school (Smink & Reiner, 2005).

Programs aiming to enhance youth's academic success and motivation must also establish strong avenues for communicating with schools. Staff members must be informed about schools' learning objectives, youth's school-day struggles, and teachers' needs (Russell, Mielke & Reisner, 2008; Weiss, Harden & Lauver, 2005). Hiring staff from schools near the program is one method of creating a natural connection between school curriculum and out of school activities (Friedman & Reisner, 2005). Though academic improvements may not occur immediately, connecting to schools is critical to ensuring the quality of a program's academic support.

Finally, youth development programs can benefit from engaging with the wider community. Research shows that connecting with local organizations and workplaces to create opportunities for community service and employment is an effective retention strategy because students begin to understand how programs help them prepare for a brighter future as responsible citizens (Weiss, Harden & Lauver, 2005; Smink & Reiner, 2005; Martin & Halperin, 2006). Furthermore, collaborating with other local youth programs provides benefits of sharing resources and effective strategies (Friedman & Reisner, 2005).

## Methods

In addition to the literature review, our research included one-hour interviews with a staff representative from each of three local organizations: College Track, the Stanford College Preparatory program (formerly known as Upward Bound), and Built to Last Collaborative.<sup>1</sup> These programs represented a variety of perspectives, yet they expressed a similar mission to support underserved youth. Through these interviews we gathered information about program structure and effective student involvement and retention strategies. In order to hear from the youth, we also conducted two focus groups with Boys and Girls Club participants of the College Bound program: seven students from the East Palo Alto Clubhouse and nine students from the Redwood City Clubhouse. We asked youth several open-ended questions to elicit information about their current satisfaction with the Clubhouse and ways in which the program activities could be improved. The interview protocols used have been included in the appendix.

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<sup>1</sup> We intended to interview a staff member from RISE, but the program is no longer in operation.

The interviews were conducted separately, with all three members of the research team, during the months of October and November 2008. All except the interview with the College Track staff member were conducted in person. The results of these interviews have been compiled and synthesized. Each researcher coded the transcribed notes from the interviews. As a group, we met to identify and discuss themes that emerged from the interviews. The quotes used throughout the paper are derived from the interviews and the names of participants have been hidden to protect confidentiality.

It is also important to recognize the researchers' subjectivity. Two of the researchers had previous experiences volunteering with College Track and the Boys and Girls Club, as well as worked with the students of the Stanford College Preparatory program.

Finally, due to limited time and resources, our analysis of findings and recommendations are limited to the opinions and experiences of a small sample of participants. It is important to recognize that we were unable to conduct observations and one-on-one interviews with College Bound participants, which may have broaden our scope.

## Overview of Programs

### *College Track*

College Track, founded in 1997, opened its first center in East Palo Alto. All of College Track's programs for high school and college students are centered around three core service areas: academic, enrichment, and college awareness. As stated in its website, the mission of College Track is to serve as "the catalyst for change for under-resourced high school students who are motivated to earn a college degree. [...] Through [their] center-based approach and core service areas, College Track has created a culture of high expectations and success." (Source: [collegetrack.org](http://collegetrack.org)). Local College Track sites serve more than 300 high school and college students, who attend more than ten high schools in East Palo Alto, Menlo Park, and Redwood City. College Track also operates three other after-school programs in Oakland, San Francisco, and New Orleans. Every College Track site has five full-time staff members and volunteers help with tutoring and leading enrichment activities. According to a College Track staff member, statistics for the class of 2008 show that one in two students finish the program by participating through the end senior year.

College Track has a highly structured set of activities. The day begins at four o'clock with a unity circle in which staff might present an SAT word of the day, introduce new students, or make announcements about upcoming events. Students then participate in two pre-determined sessions, separated by a snack time. These sessions involve academic, enrichment, or college awareness activities. At the end of the day, students participate in a closing circle.

### *Stanford College Preparation Program*

The Stanford College Preparation Program<sup>2</sup>, formerly known as Stanford Upward Bound, is a federally-funded program whose vision is to get students to complete high school and go to college. The program aims to recruit first generation college-bound students who have a sincere desire to improve academically and are interested in pursuing a postsecondary education. As stated in their website, "Stanford College Prep is an exciting, four-year academic program that challenges students to develop the skills, study habits, discipline, and attitude necessary to be successful in high school and college. Stanford College Prep offers a year-round comprehensive guidance and academic support program to help students meet the challenge of preparing for higher education" (Source: [haas.stanford.edu](http://haas.stanford.edu)).

Some of the services provided include after-school tutoring and monthly workshops on academic and life skills, such as study strategies, career exploration, and financial aid. The program integrates guest speakers that present on specific colleges, majors and careers, and provides opportunities for students to participate in educational field trips and college visits. During the summer, students have the opportunity to attend a highly popular residential program on Stanford's campus, where they become directly exposed to the college culture and have the opportunity to take college preparatory courses and participate in leadership development activities.

The program operates within the Stanford University Haas Center for Public Service and currently runs programs at the following four school sites: East Palo Alto H.S., Menlo-Atherton H.S., Sequoia H.S., and Woodside H.S. The main site is at the Stanford campus and has four professional staff and four tutor coordinators. The majority of the tutors are Stanford students who either volunteer their time or get paid through work-study.

### *Built to Last Collaborative*

The Built to Last Collaborative (BTLC) is a Menlo Park-based organization that was established to remedy the achievement gap between students from the Ravenswood District and the Sequoia District's more affluent feeder school districts. Its mission is to "create, support, and work within a beloved community in which people from all walks of life work together, side by side to increase high school graduation rates of young people at risk of failing to graduate from high school" (Source: [builttolastcollaborative.org](http://builttolastcollaborative.org)). Besides offering onsite tutoring, BTLC is utilizing a new program that emphasizes a personalized case management approach, in which academic coaches each recruit ten kids that are at risk of dropping out, and mentor them through the duration of high school. This program was just piloted at Menlo-Atherton High School last spring with 80 students. As of this Fall, the program staff are compiling information on the results of the program activities. Built to Last aspires to recruit and train 36 BTLC Academic Coaches and four Volunteer Coordinators to eventually serve between 360-450 students each year.

## **Findings and Recommendations**

### *Standards and Expectations*

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<sup>2</sup> Stanford College Prep

## *Findings*

Programs that we interviewed had strong systems of accountability balanced by a policy of flexibility and understanding of the challenges facing youth. Several of the organizations that we spoke with had clear standards and expectations for the students that participated in their programs. They also had consequences for what would happen if the standards were not met. Programs were rarely punitive, and if they were, it was only because of students' persistent refusal to meet standards. Generally, if a student does fall short, they are met with additional support.

To ensure that students benefit the most from program activities, we found that two of the three local youth organizations we interviewed set different levels of attendance expectations. For instance, the Stanford College Prep Program requires students to have an 80% attendance rate in order to be considered active participants. If students fail to meet this requirement, they are placed on probation until they improve their program participation to 100%. Likewise, College Track has a minimum attendance requirement of three times per week. It is made clear by the staff that the program cannot work if the students are not committed and present. In addition to attendance requirements, College Track uses a rigorous schedule and formal rules to keep students engaged. There is a set system for monitoring attendance and when students do not show up, the program responds rapidly. More specifically, attendance is posted on the board at the center and the staff delegates responsibility among themselves to call, write, or visit the homes of students who have stopped attending. This encourages understanding of the circumstances of a student's non-participation before he or she is penalized. If none of these methods work, the student is ultimately dismissed from the program.

Follow-up and one-on-one time to enforce expectations and track the students prevents them from falling through the cracks and dropping out of the program. For instance, one College Track staff member stated, "The kids need to know what they're doing and getting into and you need to be constantly reminding them. And then you need systems to tell you everyday who showed up and who didn't, absolutely every week if not every day." Likewise, academic coaches at Built to Last Collaborative encourage full academic engagement defined by making good grades, earning credits, turning in all homework assignments, and showing appropriate behavior in school. The coaches maintain constant communication with the students and schools to make sure that these standards are being met, and do anything they can to support and encourage the students so that they fulfill these expectations. BGC youth at Redwood City likewise described an accountability system of one-on-one meetings in which staff members communicate with students about their progress and level of participation. The staff has a file for each student, monitors the students' grades and attendance, and talks to their teachers.

Youth appreciate the personalized attention they receive as staff members monitor their level of participation. As one student noted positively, "They talk about you in the meetings a lot, too. 'Oh, he's doing good.' or 'Oh, he needs help.'" Students are encouraged rather than pressured by this because they know that staff are genuinely concerned about how hard students are trying, whether or not they have high academic achievements. As another student expressed, "If she [BGC staff member] sees you are coming everyday and have low grades she thinks it's her fault and she blames herself and tries to work with you more." Setting transparent expectations and monitoring students' participation ensures that staff members are aware when students require additional supports.

## *Recommendations*

Given these findings, we recommend that College Bound set clear standards and expectations for the students' involvement and performance both in the program and in school.

The most important and basic aspect of involvement is attendance, and this should be given the greatest attention. In order to create a sense of commitment amongst program participants, staff should communicate the ideal of high program attendance, along with why it is important. Students should be reminded that their level of participation affects other students' engagement. As discussed in other parts of the paper, students expressed a desire for a stronger sense of community, which suggests staff should more explicitly communicate to students how low levels of participation will affect program solidarity. Staff should be firm about minimum attendance requirements, but should explain to students that when they fail to meet expectations, the staff members will respond first by taking measures to understand what is keeping the student from attending the program, not with punitive treatment. As literature has shown, a supportive rather than punitive response proves to be the most effective strategy for dealing with non-participation (Weiss, Harden & Lauver, 2005). Staff should establish consequences and follow through on them as soon as a student shows signs of disengagement, either by approaching the student or contacting his or her family. An attendance chart may help maintain high levels of participation, offering the students a visual cue that indicates how often they are coming.

College Bound should also hold students to high academic standards. College Bound can demonstrate investment in the students' academic performance by keeping a file for each participant with information about their grades, academic credits, school behavior, and homework assignment submissions as reported by their teachers. Students should be informed of this tracking, and staff should allocate time during regular one-on-one meetings to show them the contents of their file. Staff should also discuss the progress that they have made and the significance that it has for their records and future potential. Students will have an opportunity to understand how school plays a role in their future, ask further questions, and develop a relationship with a mentor that shows that he or she cares about the student's performance.

## *Student Involvement*

### *Findings*

Through the course of our research, we explored best practices for increasing and maintaining student involvement, asking program staff and staff about the challenges they face and the specific strategies they have implemented to enhance student involvement. We also asked students at the Redwood City and East Palo Alto Clubhouses what it was that attracted them and kept them coming to the program. We found that students' decisions to drop out of programs vary greatly, but that creating occasions to socialize in a safe environment, offering incentives, providing opportunities for leadership, and helping students make concrete plans for future goals can keep students coming back.

Program staff expressed that challenges to students' persistence in the programs ranged from the practical to the psychological. Some students had to leave academic programs to attend to responsibilities at home. Family tragedies or money problems meant students had to care for siblings or work a job to support their family. Because of these circumstances, we found that it is easy for students to fall behind and lose their enthusiasm in school, leading them to drop out. Once they leave school, these youth find little reason to remain in an academic support program, and often stop coming. Thus, poor school performance can be a warning sign of a potential drop out. However, one important finding is that students can remain highly engaged in after-school programs even when they are performing poorly at school. A staff member at Stanford College Prep said that students will attend the program and do well on tests there even when they have poor school attendance and low grades, and claimed that it is because the program responds to students with the attention and proper supports they need to succeed academically.

In our interviews with organizations and students, we consistently found that it is hardest to keep boys involved. Even when boys are motivated to go to school and attend college at the onset of high school, peer pressures or unsupportive teachers often lead them to drop out. Students and organizations both said that 10<sup>th</sup> grade was typically the time that boys dropped out. Staff members at Stanford College Prep and Built to Last also said that students are victimized by the law, often times labeled as 'bad kids' simply because they have low grades and treated as criminals even when their behaviors are the same as high-income, non-minority students. As one staff member from Built to Last said, "There are drug addicts and alcoholics and abusers in college and high school, but our markers for those kids in middle-class are not used in deficit ways like we do in the lower income areas." In other words, rates of drug and alcohol use are seen as deficits for students who fail to graduate high school and for those living in poverty, but the same problems are occurring in college and in rich neighborhoods. Because we heard from many BGC students that they have had encounters with the law, either themselves or their family members, it is important for programs not to view bad behavior as criminal but instead as an opportunity to provide additional supports and a safe space for development.

The students and organizations we interviewed all said that having a safe environment for socializing is one of the greatest incentives for student involvement. Students often join the BGC because they are bored at home, or have friends that encourage them to join. During focus groups, students spoke highly of "girl talk" and "boy talk," times when the teens are able to come together and talk about the specific problems they are having. Through volunteer opportunities and involvement in College Bound or the Keystone Club, the youth are also able to establish new friendships with both peers and younger students. Several students said that they enjoyed volunteering at the BGC because they are able to work with little kids and help them. One student said that she enjoys and is inspired by her job at the Center for a New Generation, where she mentors younger kids that have hard family lives but are all planning on going to college. When asked what could be improved about College Bound, students said they hoped more teens would get involved. They seemed distressed that so many show up for one day and then disappear for long periods of time.

Beyond socializing, programs also offer incentives such as movie nights, pizza, Jamba Juice cards, summer opportunities and trips. Sports were also an incentive for the BGCP youth to attend. Students were enthusiastic about having more of them offered, particularly basketball and soccer. Students at the Club expressed they enjoyed a trip Santa Cruz last spring and were excited about a trip to Atlanta to visit colleges as well as a new program to go new places every other Friday

afternoon. The students know that these trips only come as a reward for high levels of participation and homework completion. For instance, students must earn at least a 2.5 GPA, do 500 hours of volunteering, and attend all meetings in order to go to Atlanta. Summer programs can also be used to boost participation during the school year. They provide an opportunity for program participants to form deeper relationships with one another and to therefore be more invested in the program. Further, summer programs provide an opportunity to create cohesion from one school year to the next, promoting learning outside of the traditional school year rather than letting those three months go to waste. For example, Stanford College Prep uses its summer program as an incentive for school year participation, requiring students to have an 80% attendance record to be eligible to participate. The five-week residential summer program held on the Stanford campus includes workshops run by Stanford students, inspirational speakers, and a career day.

Another way programs keep students involved is by creating leadership opportunities. We found that students will attend programs to socialize and take part in recreational activities, but that this cannot sustain participation throughout high school. During a focus group, we asked whether students anticipated remaining at BGC through high school and one responded, "It's funny if you're still here when you're big. If you're not working here or volunteering and just coming, it's kind of weird. What are you going to do, play ball with the little kids?" Teenagers are not kids anymore, but are not yet adults and therefore laying out specific roles for them provides a niche where they can feel a sense of purpose and belonging. Through our interviews, we found that there are many ways of promoting leadership. The Stanford College Prep Program holds leadership conferences for students, and has a Student Advisory Board that keeps students engaged in the program. According to one staff member, the Advisory Board is a strategy that this organization uses to combat the problem of male dropouts in particular. As she stated, "Those kids on the Advisory Board have below C average [...] They just like coming here and being a part of a group that's going to be leading their peers. In order to be a part of this program you have to start learning to communicate." Boys who are not doing well in school are encouraged to join the board with two purposes in mind: this unique opportunity allows students to gain leadership skills and to provide input on how the program operates and can be improved.

We also found that BGC participants appreciated the opportunities for them to volunteer and to be employed once they graduate. One older teen originally joined the BGC because he needed credits for graduation and could do volunteer hours. When asked whether there were any challenges that kept him from coming, his response was simply, "there's not a challenge for me to keep coming here. I work here part-time and I volunteer here too." Given the opportunity to lead, he was able to continue coming and eventually be employed at the BGC. This interaction with former BGC participants may allow current students to connect program activities with future job opportunities.

Finally, programs enhance involvement by helping students make concrete plans for the future. During a focus group, one student said, "My friends party or whatever and I have to remember in my mind, 'You can't party forever. You'll need something to fall back on.' I realized that even though I don't know what I'll go to college for, I know I need something to have to fall back on." Because we found that BGC participants spoke broadly about their future aspirations, often citing law or medicine as future careers, it will be necessary for programs to consider how to help students think more concretely. Thinking about the future, students at the BGC appreciate one-on-one meetings with staff members to help them set goals. After bringing students to college fairs, staff members work with individual College Bound participants to determine what colleges are the best

match. Staff also help them understand all the requirements that are involved in applying and getting scholarships. Similarly, College Track integrates an advisory period in its schedule in which students are encouraged to think through their goals in a small setting.

### *Recommendations*

As we reported in our findings, students have many pressures that challenge involvement. Programs hoping to retain students must balance academic support with fun, and community-building activities with personalized attention. The BGCP might consider the following recommendations as ways of boosting student involvement.

First, College Bound can offer incentives for students to increase attendance and do well in school. The literature and our interviews all emphasized that offering rewards for jobs well done are much more effective in changing behavior than punishing students for doing poorly. The also recommend the BGCP consider offering tangible incentives such as gift certificates, and activity-based incentives such as movie nights, teen nights, field trips, and sports games. The BGCP already uses trips as incentives for student participation and success. If possible, the BGCP might consider starting a College Bound summer program that would create cohesion between school years.

The BGCP can also expand on what it has already done to promote relationship-building. Because the students we interviewed in our focus groups enjoyed teen nights and 'girl and boy talk' so much, we encourage BGCP to continue these programs and establish weekly opportunities for peers to come together and socialize. Hosting events can help instill a sense of belonging among program participants so that they may want to continue participating even in what may be less entertaining, academic activities. Based on our findings that BGC students enjoy their roles as mentors and volunteers working with younger students, the BGCP might consider establishing a mentoring program in which older teens meet with younger students to discuss current struggles and future goals. High school juniors and seniors could mentor freshmen and sophomores who could mentor middle school students. The BGCP could expand on these mentor-mentee relationships by planning community-building activities centered on leadership and communication skills. When older students establish relationships with younger ones, they might feel a greater sense of commitment to come to the program on a regular basis. Because they are helping younger mentees to succeed, the experience of mentoring can also inspire older youth to persist through their own struggles.

We also recommend providing opportunities for leadership in College Bound. When they are given an occasion to lead, students feel a greater sense of responsibility and may focus more on their work. If possible, the BGCP could also hire students that need income as paid interns. If money is a concern, their families may be more likely to support their participation in the program. Leadership opportunities can take on various forms, but one recommendation is to establish a student advisory board. The advisory board would consist of several students that could help plan events, workshops, and speakers. More importantly, the goal of this advisory board would be for students to keep College Bound staff aware of their continually changing needs. Students could either be selected by their peers as representatives or staff could chose students who demonstrate ability to contribute. Alternatively, the student advisory board could be composed of College Bound seniors who have advanced through the program so it would be an incentive for them to stay in the program. This unique opportunity would allow at-risk students to feel a greater sense of belonging

and ownership in the Club. The BGCP could also create job positions for recently graduated high school students. Some students might not be quite ready for college, and employing them at College Bound might keep them on track for future goals.

Finally, the BGCP can help students make concrete plans for future goals and check in with them on a weekly basis. Youth we interviewed spoke highly of staff members that held one-on-one meetings to discuss goals and the pathways required to attain them. Students need to be constantly reminded of why they are in the program and how it pertains to their future success. Goals and timelines for achieving them should be written and made available for students to constantly review. During these personalized meetings, students acquire knowledge about college entry requirements, types of majors, and various career options.

## Staffing

### *Findings*

The programs we interviewed tended to have staff who had a range of experience and backgrounds. Staff positions consisted of both full-time and part-time jobs, as well as volunteers who were both young and mid-career professionals. One of the main findings from the interviews is that program staff and Boys and Girls Club participants preferred to have staff members who, regardless of their professional experiences, could connect with students and their challenging backgrounds. As one Built to Last staff member stated, "It's all about openness, creating rapport with people. It is a gift. The coaches have extended adult respect but maintain boundaries and an open rapport with kids. The idea is that you stay with them until graduation."

Students from both of the focus groups emphasized a desire for staff who genuinely cared for them and who were invested in their academics and personal lives. In short, students want staff to work with them individually, advocate for them, and relate to them. Importantly, students expressed a preference for staff members who could show that they cared about their personal lives, but did not invade their privacy. Further, the students revealed they do not like staff members to 'fake' their personalities in order to relate. As one youth stated, "You don't have to be from here, but don't try to flip your personality around to pretend like you fit in. Just don't be fake. Be real." Another added, "You just need to get to know them and they love you. Just act like you care. Don't try to be them or tell them your story." Instead of hiring employees who were in it just for the paycheck, students recommended staff members who would provide nurturing and caring relationships.

Several of the students also reflected on their experience working one-on-one with the College Bound site director. These youth expressed that they enjoyed their individual meetings with the College Bound director because these meetings were targeted to their specific needs and interests. That is, students appreciated being able to discuss future goals and create plans for accomplishing them.

We also found that programs aim to hire staff who balance authority with compassion. From the programs we interviewed, we heard that ideal staff members enforce the programs' rules and

expectations whenever participants stop attending. They remind students that their involvement in activities is necessary if they want to remain in the program. Staff also emphasized the importance of building caring relationships, so that students can trust adults and so they are more willing to share personal or academic problems they encounter.

Finally, we found that one of the organizations trains staff for specific functions. The Built to Last Collaborative's case management approach requires that they train staff to become efficient academic coaches who learn appropriate tools to work with youth. We found that one of the ways coaches learn about case management is through trainings provided by the Department of Human Services. By engaging in this relevant training, the coaches learn how to conduct one-on-one meetings, lead small group discussions, and communicate with parents and schools. Through this they begin to understand and be better prepared to work with, mentor and advocate for youth.

### *Recommendations*

Much of the programs' success in youth organizations falls on the staff. In order to provide a welcoming and supporting environment, we recommend that the Boys and Girls Club continue using case managers. Each staff member could be assigned a small group of students that would not exceed 10 to 15 youth. With the appropriate program structure in place, staff would be able to meet with students one-on-one every week to discuss challenges encountered in the classroom or at home, and their life goals and career aspirations. They should assist students to develop and define these goals, teach them the vocabulary necessary to describe them and provide the resources and skills to achieve them.

As demonstrated in the findings, there is a broad array of problems that could contribute to a student dropping out of the program. Students should be able to trust the staff and know them well enough to be willing to discuss challenges they face. Staff must be tuned-in and concerned enough to ask the appropriate questions, and be prepared to attempt to address the issues they may discover. This approach will allow the staff to build caring and supportive relationships with the students, a positive strategy that may assist with student retention. From the youth perspective, having a case manager would create an individualized experience that would allow them to view staff members as more than just tutors, but as mentors and friends. We recommend that College Bound determines whether staff will be involved in student's personal lives in addition to monitoring their academic progress. Once it is decided, the BGCP should explicitly communicate to new members what the role of the staff will be. As one BGC youth reported, "Most of my friends stopped coming because they thought the staff that were working with teens were getting too involved in their personal lives instead of their academic life. [These students] thought coming here was just for homework." At the same time, this particular youth said she appreciated staff members being involved in her personal life. Therefore, it is important for College Bound to train staff to recognize which students benefit from more "space" and autonomy and which students require more. The case management approach can accommodate both types of students.

## *Building Networks*

### *Findings*

All three organizations we interviewed emphasized the importance of building networks between families, schools and the wider community in order to share resources.

Establishing relationships with principals and teachers increases access to student's academic records and progress. A student's school attendance record and level of engagement is related to their perceived need for academic programs like the ones we interviewed. Thus, all three organizations we interviewed believed that staying connected to schools was important though the approach they used and the level of direct involvement varied by individual organizations. For instance, the three programs mentioned having access to student's transcripts and their approach of reviewing them. In the case of College Track, participants attend 17 different high schools and therefore the program staff focus on building relationships with individual students instead of having extensive direct contact with the students' teachers. College Track staff check in via paper progress reports that students bring to teachers. In this approach, teachers sign off on whether the student has been turning in homework so that program staff is aware of students' progress in school. However, a staff member from College Track identified collaboration with the schools as one area that they hoped to improve. The Built to Last Collaborative and Stanford College Prep both have closer ties with teachers because they are partly based on school campuses.

Moreover, since two of the programs hold after-school tutoring at various school sites, we found that it is important for program staff to get to know the teachers and counselors in order to serve as advocates for the students and maintain a connection between the school and the program. A staff member from Stanford College Prep said that by showing students that the staff maintained constant communication with their teachers, the students may feel more compelled to continue attending the program and share with staff some of the academic issues they are struggling with. In the words of this staff member, she was "doing more visits to the school so that they (the students) know that it's not just about popping into the Haas Center (the program). We want to make our presence stronger for them to know we're not just one of those programs they pop into." BGCP youth themselves indicated that the staff members they liked most were the ones that went to their schools to talk to their teachers and principals to advocate for them.

Through our conversations with various staff, we learned that all three programs also maintain constant communication with the parents or legal guardians of the student participants. The type and level of communication varied by program, but generally, program staff informed parents of the expectations for their students through orientation meetings, participation in student showcases, or end of semester celebrations. In all instances, the program staff had access to the parents' cell phone or home numbers, and as one staff member from Built to Last Collaborative put it, "We know who the kids are, where they live." One program staff member mentioned that when students stopped attending the program, the staff called the parents to learn whether the absence was a mishap or if there was a more worrisome problem.

When referring to the importance of building relationships and maintaining constant communication with the families, one of the staff stated, "There's always a partnership with the parents. We are supporting them and they are supporting us. They'll call and say they're having a hard time and we'll conference with them. We do the same...if we have a concern, we pair up with the parents as far as academics. Sometimes the parents don't understand the academics. What does this D mean for next year and for getting into college?" Communicating with the participants' parents helps the programs respond quickly to student and parent needs. This also expresses that in

some ways Stanford College Prep is teaching the parents as well so they can better understand their student's academic progress. During one focus group, College Bound students mentioned that the BGC involved parents by hosting a "family reunion" during which parents and students go to workshops, and discuss future goals with each other. The students seemed to appreciate these connections to their family life. Importantly, a Built to Last staff member mentioned that staff should tell parents only what they need to know about program happenings and their children's success without students feeling as though their privacy has been invaded.

Finally, programs expressed the importance of collaborating with other local organizations in order to share resources, best practices, and opportunities for students. As one staff member from Built to Last Collaborative stated, "It is best when programs work with each other and share resources. Each organization knows who they have and what they're doing, and have a system of continuum of care to know how to pass one person to another program." This staff member gave the example of a task force that operated in San Jose, a board that brought together non-profits to share strategies and fund. Similarly, College Track partners with an organization that does backpacking trips called "Back to Nature" that brings students on trips. As shared by the staff member, College Track has different partnerships: "There's also a group of educators that develop standards and curriculum. We have professionals called "Guaranteed A+ or 4.0" that help train our staff. We have partnerships to get free or low cost ACT or SAT prep." Thus, programs utilize a variety of partnerships such as sharing leadership curriculums with other organizations, or creating local opportunities for students to do community service and visit colleges. Several programs expressed goals of working with large numbers of youth who will take future advocacy roles in order to revive entire communities.

### *Recommendations*

Given the numerous challenges faced by the student population the Boys and Girls Club serves—which tends to primarily comprised of low-income and minority students—one of the main recommendations that we derived from this research is that establishing partnerships and sustaining networks with other local community organizations, schools, and students' families is an excellent approach.

First, the Boys and Girls Club may consider maintaining stronger and more frequent communication with family members of College Bound participants. The program staff should continue to reach out to parents to invite them to orientation meetings; however, other on-going communication efforts could include quarterly one-on-one meetings to discuss the student's progress in the program as well as in school. Other opportunities to interact with students' families could include more open houses and workshops aimed at teaching parents about high school graduation requirements and college preparation information. Moreover, parents and older siblings could be invited to participate in college trips to serve as chaperones and to have the opportunity to learn information that will assist them in better supporting their children. By effectively and continuously communicating with the parents and legal guardians, the Boys and Girls Club will learn more about the students they serve while providing tools for parents to be stronger advocates for their children.

As we learned from other local youth-serving organizations, another effective strategy is to build relationships with the principals and teachers of College Bound participants. Given that these educators spend a significant amount of time with the children in the classroom, they would be the best resource to understand the academic progress of each student and to learn what their struggles are. One recommendation is that College Bound staff members ask teachers to sign a biweekly report card sharing how students are doing in the classroom and pointing out any difficulty they are having with the material being covered in class. Although this may seem like additional work for teachers, the College Bound staff could express their interest in becoming a stronger ally to the school in order to improve student achievement.

Additionally, with a case management approach, the College Bound staff may consider asking the school for permission to access students' transcripts and other academic records in order to check for student improvement. Moreover, the staff should also consider monitoring school attendance as this information may help staff to identify students who are potentially in risk of becoming truant and ultimately, dropping out. Some districts set an automatic delivery of this material to local organizations, and given the positive experience of other local youth-serving organizations with school personnel, the Boys and Girls Club staff could look into building this partnership with schools.

Finally, given the limited resources and many challenges faced by local youth, another recommendation is that the BGCP consider collaborating more with local organizations in order to reach out to as many students as possible. By establishing a working relationship with organizations such as College Track, Stanford College Prep Program, and Built to Last Collaborative, the BGCP could ensure they are not serving the same student population. Moreover, a more formalized network would allow these various organizations to share with each other effective recruitment and retention strategies in order to serve students as best as they can.

## *Marketing the Program*

### *Findings*

In regards to program recruitment and publicity, we found that Stanford College Prep, Built to Last Collaborative, and College Track all employed similar recruiting strategies. All three programs work with students living in low-income neighborhoods who typically receive lower levels of support in their high schools. In order to reach out to as many students as possible, the programs relied on word of mouth, teacher or principal referrals, and school presentations. Through these recruitment strategies, the programs market themselves as academic supports for motivated students of varied achievement levels. On average, the students tend to be at or below proficiency in English and mathematics on the California standardized tests. Thus, having high motivation did not necessarily mean having high GPA's, and low achievement did not preclude students from taking part if they were motivated to improvement.

We found that academic, recreational, and social aspects of programs all draw in youth and encourage them to join and remain in the programs. This is valuable information, as it can inform marketing strategies to emphasize the College Bound components that are most attractive to youth.

First, we found that BGC students appreciate both activities and the academic support. Many of the students expressed how much they liked the Teen Nights as these activities allowed them to interact with their peers and develop new friendships with other program participants. Students also enjoyed interacting and forming relationships with younger kids at the BGC. During our two focus groups, several students also mentioned how much they appreciated the assistance they received with their homework and being able to rely on staff whenever they needed help with their homework. Also, as it has been previously mentioned, students appreciated the caring relationships they formed with program staff. Some mentioned they particularly liked coming to the Boys and Girls Club because there was a staff member whom they could confide in.

Another reason why students attend these programs is because many of the youth aspire to go to college, and being enrolled in programs such as the Stanford College Prep, College Track, or the BGC College Bound, gave them opportunities to learn more about college through presentations put on by the staff. During the focus groups, many of the students expressed how much they valued the college trips because they exposed students to future opportunities. Another recurring theme was that of the students' desires to join a program where their peers are involved, as well as how much they value the opportunity to maintain and develop social networks. One of the students mentioned that he began to attend the program because he did not have many close friends at school and he felt that his involvement in College Bound could help him develop new friendships. Other students mentioned that they began to attend the BGC because their friends were also participants of College Bound.

### *Recommendations*

Since students are the greatest stakeholders in the program, College Bound should be marketed towards their interests. Given what we learned about students' motivations for wanting to be involved, either because they aspire to attend college or because they want to make new friends, College Bound and other youth programs could emphasize some of the opportunities that are created if they remain involved in the program. In order to attract students to join the program, we recommend that during recruitment presentations the staff should emphasize to students the numerous academic supports and opportunities to engage in extracurricular activities that the program offers. Another effective strategy could be to invite current College Bound participants to recommend friends who may benefit from being involved in the program and to invite them to a "Bring a Friend" night where friends and siblings can be exposed to the benefits of being a part of College Bound. The BGC may consider targeting 8<sup>th</sup> graders through presentations and open houses so that they enter high school with a college-oriented mindset, but College Bound should also remain open to older youth that want to join later.

Finally, BGC youth are very enthusiastic about the Club. As one club member stated, "People who don't come here need to come here." Furthermore, the youth are strong advocates not only in recruiting new participants but also in helping peers stay in College Bound when they are on the path to dropping out. When asked what the BGC could do once students dropped out of the program, one youth said, "If I was in their shoes and a staff asked me to come, I wouldn't. But if someone from my own youth would tell me to come I would. They'd be willing to listen (to the youth), even if they didn't give it (returning to the program) a chance." At-risk students may listen more readily to their peers than to adults and therefore College Bound participants themselves should be employed to recruit students. BGC youth genuinely want their non-attending peers to

join, and are a fantastic source of potential marketers for the program during presentations and "Bring a Friend" nights.

## Conclusion

Academic programs cannot successfully retain at-risk youth by being places for students to drop in and out at their own volition. The BGCP knows this and it is only a matter of determining which practices will best match high school students' specific needs at College Bound. We found from our literatures review and interviews with youth and local organizations that older teenagers, and particularly boys, are more difficult to engage than middle and elementary students because they have more responsibilities at home, greater challenges in school, and have strong peer pressures to be on the street. Students come to academic programs like College Bound because they enjoy the activities, want to go to college and appreciate the academic help, and they have opportunities to develop strong relationships with peers and staff.

We found first and foremost that students greatly appreciated the Boys and Girls Club and wanted more opportunities to participate in fun activities, to receive academic support, and to involve their friends and family members. The youth and organizations we interviewed, along with the literature we reviewed, all stress the importance of compassionate staff members who can work with students individually, advocate for them, and relate to them. Academic programs are best suited to maintain attendance and motivation when they communicate clear expectations and hold students to them. Students want to succeed and are likely to remain in programs when they develop meaningful peer and staff relationships, can participate in engaging activities, have opportunities for leadership, and view programs as being relevant to future achievements.

As College Bound grows, we recommend the following:

- Market the program to youth that are motivated and want to achieve long-term goals, regardless of their academic standing, and emphasize opportunities for field trips, social activities, and academic support.
- Set high standards for student participation, implement a strong system of monitoring attendance and academic progress, and respond rapidly when students begin to disengage. Instead of punishing students for non-participation, offer additional supports and incentives for jobs well done.
- Pursue a case-management approach so that students have the opportunity to meet regularly with staff members. One-on-one meetings can be used discuss each student's progress and make concrete plans for future goals, and to foster caring relationships between youth and staff so that students are comfortable discussing current struggles.
- Create leadership opportunities for older youth that are different from those of younger youth, so that they have an incentive to remain and progress through the program. Youth

can be employed as volunteers, mentors to younger students, and interns to market the program. Consider youth to be the greatest advocates for the program. Create a student advisory board so that College Bound can shape program elements to ongoing student concerns.

- Establish positive relationships with families, schools, local organizations and the wider community in order to share resources and successful strategies.

Our research has been limited by time and scope, but we hope that in conjunction with one other Stanford research team that interviewed four additional local organizations and held two focus groups, the BGCP will find useful strategies to implement for the College Bound program. The BGCP can learn from local practices and the broader literature, but the youth are the greatest resources to understand the particular problems that plague their neighborhood, school, and family contexts. It is the students that will shape and empower the program for themselves and for their peers. We heard from youth time and time again that the Boys and Girls Club is invaluable to their safety and academic success. One girl, whose two brothers got involved in drugs and are now in jail, spoke about her work as a youth mentor at the Center for a New Generation, “I build relationships with all of them. Most of them would be doing God knows what if they weren’t there, but most are thinking about college. At first I wasn’t thinking about it but now I am because of them.” Youth are inspired by their peers’ accomplishments, they want opportunities to succeed, for themselves and for their friends and family members, and they view the Boys and Girls Club as a place that provides those opportunities. Youth have a strong leadership voice and can help the BGCP recruit and retain members for College Bound and design program standards, activities, and atmosphere.

We believe that the BGCP is in a strong position to guide youth that are motivated and want the means to achieve long-term goals, regardless of current academic success. We look forward to seeing how College Bound develops, as it has already come a long way in its initial months. We also thank the BGCP for giving us the opportunity to conduct this research and hope that our findings will be useful in serving the needs of high school students, who we view as vital forces in their own achievements and in the future of their communities.

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## Appendix

### Interview Protocols

#### Interview Guide

Inform interviewees that all information will be kept confidential and only used in aggregate and will not be specifically identified, unless permission is given.

Program Directors/Staff:

1. How would you describe Upward Bound's philosophy or mission? Approach to the problem, students, etc.
2. What criteria and process do you use to select students for your program?
  - a. Once students are in the program, what types of standards do you have for them?
  - b. How do you determine who your "active" members are?
  - c. Are you tracking whether your students are on pace to graduate, and if so, how?
3. What about their own lives enables vulnerable students to stay connected to your program?
  - a. What specific activities and methods do you use to engage vulnerable students? That is, what are your greatest retention tools and practices?
  - b. What are your organization's retention rates?
4. What do you think prevents students from staying in your program? Are there any particular warning signs, specific behaviors, or patterns that you have noticed?
5. Do you notice any differences between long-term and short-term members of your programs?
6. What are the greatest challenges for the youth? What are the greatest challenges for Upward Bound in working with youth?

Youth:

*Welcome, introductions, and focus group norms:*

- Thank you for coming to talk to us about BGC/FCE this afternoon. We just hope to hear your voices and understand BGC/FCE better from talking to you.
- If there are any activities that you don't want to do during our time together, that's okay, just say so. This time is meant to be fun and comfortable for you, so we encourage you to participate as much as you can, be honest, and enjoy yourself.
- Let's go around and say names, schools, and one memory from your time at BGC/FCE to start.
- The purpose of the focus group is to learn more about the benefits of BGC/FCE so that we can continue to improve the program and know more about how this affects the students who participate.
- Great, now we can set up some rules for this time together.
  - o Everything that we say here is confidential and stays in this circle.

- o This is a safe place. Be respectful of others as they share.
- o We may take notes while you are talking, but this is just so that we can remember what you say. You may see any notes we write if you want.
- o This is not a test, so there are no wrong answers and it is okay to have the same answers as someone else, too.
- o Are there any other rules that you think we should have?

1. What did you do this summer related to BGCP/FCE?
2. Imagine you are talking to a friend that does not come to BGCP/FCE. How do you describe your involvement here to that person?
3. When and why did you join BGCP?
4. What do you gain from coming here?
  - a. What keeps you coming back regularly?
  - b. How might friends, family, or feelings of personal belonging/responsibility affect this?
  - c. What BGCP programs are most important to your academic life?
5. Is there anything in your life that makes it hard for you to come here? Anything that pulls you away?
6. Where do you imagine yourself in five years? (What does your life look like in the future?)
7. What are the challenges you foresee in achieving your goals in the future?
8. If you were the boss at the BGCP/FCE, what are the major changes that you would make to improve the program?