

Developing Positive Young Adults

LESSONS FROM TWO DECADES
OF YOUTHBUILD PROGRAMS



A Framework for Understanding Identity Development Findings from YouthBuild Programs (1991-1994)

Ronald F. Ferguson

Jason Snipes

Transforming Youth from the Inside Out Program Directors' Views of YouthBuild's Potential (2014)

Farhana Hossain

Michelle S. Manno

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Ronald F. Ferguson
(Harvard University)

Jason Snipes
(WestEd)

Farhana Hossain
(MDRC)

Michelle S. Manno
(MDRC)

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Overview

Globalization and technological advances have increased the importance of a high school degree, academic skills, and career preparation for achieving labor market success. Fortunately, the high school graduation rate has increased in recent years, but high school dropouts and others with few skills still face dire circumstances. They are disproportionately disconnected from work, more likely to live in chronic poverty, and at greater risk for criminal behavior.

YouthBuild strives to help. With nearly 300 affiliated sites nationwide, the program offers academic support, job skills training, counseling and case management, life skills and leadership training, and opportunities for community service. Most important, the program aims to deliver these services in a culture that focuses on positive youth development — empowering participants to take responsibility for their lives and their communities by focusing on their strengths and potential for leadership.

A growing body of evidence suggests that programs that actively incorporate such youth development principles and practices, fostering positive identity, resilience, and emotional and moral competence, are more effective in decreasing negative outcomes and increasing young people's chances of long-term success. While quantifiable measures such as educational attainment or increased earnings are important to gauge the impact of a program like YouthBuild, it is equally essential to understand the less tangible outcomes that may predict success in the long run.

This report presents findings from two separate research efforts that shed light on the process of youth transformation and identity development in YouthBuild. The first paper, written in 1997 by Ronald F. Ferguson and Jason Snipes, is based on a formative evaluation of early YouthBuild programs between 1991 and 1994. In that evaluation, participants described themselves as more efficacious, optimistic, and morally upright after participating in the program for a year. Young adults whom Ferguson and Snipes interviewed spoke often of deep personal transformations not only in their own identities but also in relationships with friends, family, and community. The second paper presents the findings from a 2014 survey of YouthBuild program directors across the country and shows that the themes Ferguson and Snipes set forth continue to resonate.

Today, like 20 years ago, the vast majority of YouthBuild participants come from communities where people struggle to meet everyday needs. Trust is often a scarce resource. Early negative experiences related to poverty and marginalization — including bad public schools, complex family arrangements, housing instability, and violence in the community — engender feelings of mistrust, doubt, and inferiority among many who find their way to YouthBuild. Program culture promotes caring yet demanding relationships between staff members and participants. Staff members strive to persuade participants that they are able and worthy to achieve life success. Even if jobs or other opportunities following graduation are scarce, the program directors whom we surveyed report that the program broadens participants' horizons — changing perspectives, behaviors, and lifestyles. Continued supports in the months after YouthBuild, they stressed, are important to help graduates stay on track.

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Ronald F. Ferguson and Jason Snipes, authors of “A Framework for Understanding Identity Development: Findings from YouthBuild Programs (1991-1994)”

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Ronald F. Ferguson has taught at Harvard University since 1983, focusing on education and economic development. He is the creator of the Tripod Project for School Improvement and is the faculty cochair and director of the Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard University.

Jason Snipes is the director of alliance research for the Regional Educational Laboratory West at WestEd, a nonprofit education research firm. He was previously a researcher at MDRC.

Farhana Hossain and Michelle S. Manno, authors of “Transforming Youth from the Inside Out: Program Directors’ Views of YouthBuild’s Potential (2014)”

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Introduction

An estimated 3 million young people in the United States between the ages of 16 and 24 have left high school before obtaining a degree,¹ and many are not working.² With limited work experience and low levels of educational attainment, these young people face significant challenges in achieving successful employment and self-sufficiency as they approach adulthood, particularly given the changes in the recent youth labor market.³ Besides facing higher rates of unemployment, young people who leave high school prematurely are more likely to live in chronic poverty and take part in risky or criminal behavior.⁴ Reengaging these young people in activities that help them make a successful transition to adulthood is one of our nation's central social policy challenges.

YouthBuild is one program working with young people to overcome challenges associated with low education and skill levels and lack of employment. It started as an idea in East Harlem, New York City, in the late 1970s as a means for teenagers to improve their community while obtaining education and job training to break the cycle of poverty. From the beginning, YouthBuild has offered a combination of services to low-income, out-of-school young people ages 16 to 24, including academic support, job skills training, counseling and case management, and community service and leadership development opportunities.

Today YouthBuild is a federally and privately funded program operated by nearly 300 organizations nationwide, with even more programs operating internationally.⁵ Most Youth-

¹U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, "Percentage of High School Dropouts Among Persons 16 Through 24 Years Old (Status Dropout Rate) and Number of Status Dropouts, by Noninstitutionalized or Institutionalized Status, Birth In or Outside of the United States, and Selected Characteristics: 2010 and 2011," *Digest of Education Statistics*, accessed March 2015, <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/index.asp>.

²An estimated 1.6 million young people between 18 and 24 years old are out of school and work and have neither a high school diploma nor a General Educational Development certificate (GED). U.S. Census Bureau, "2011 American Community Survey Public Use Microdata" (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2012), <http://factfinder2.census.gov>.

³During the Great Recession of 2007-2009 and its aftermath, the youth unemployment rate rose much more steeply than that of adults. The unemployment rate among young people who have not completed high school is even higher. Lawrence Mishel, Josh Bivens, Elise Gould, and Heidi Shierholz, *The State of Working America*, 12th ed. (Ithaca, NY: Economic Policy Institute, 2012).

⁴Andrew Sum, Ishwar Khatiwada, and Joseph McLaughlin, *The Consequences of Dropping Out of High School: Joblessness and Jailing for High School Dropouts and the High Cost for Taxpayers* (Boston: Center for Labor Market Studies Publications, Northeastern University, 2009.)

⁵In support of its replication efforts, staff members from the original YouthBuild program (called Youth Action Program) founded YouthBuild USA in 1990 to provide technical assistance and training to new programs. In 1992, under the umbrella of YouthBuild USA, a number of local YouthBuild programs came together to form the YouthBuild Affiliated Network. Its members agree to uphold certain standards for

(continued)

Build programs are fairly small, serving between 20 and 40 young people in a cohort that attends class and works together full time for roughly one year, although some programs serve over 100 each year. These programs are mostly urban, but an appreciable number operate in rural communities. The vast majority of programs provide construction skills training whereby participants work on renovating or constructing housing for low-income or homeless populations. Since 1994, more than 130,000 YouthBuild participants have produced nearly 28,000 units of affordable housing across the country.⁶ In recent years, a growing number of programs have also begun to offer alternative job training opportunities in fields such as nursing or information technology, while retaining a goal of helping the community.

What distinguishes YouthBuild from many other programs offering similar services is the intentional blending of program components (academics, job skills training, case management, etc.) in a culture that emphasizes family and community, sets high standards, fosters civic engagement, and promotes social and personal responsibility, the latter of which are commonly associated with positive youth development.⁷ While YouthBuild has evolved over the years, the vision of the program has remained centered around developing young people into leaders who are “taking responsibility to make things go right for [their lives], for [their] family, for the program, for the community, and for the world.”⁸ The development of such a multifaceted identity — in relation to one’s self and to others in the surrounding environment — is critical, according to YouthBuild staff, in developing lasting attitudinal change that will continue to transform young people beyond their participation in the program.⁹

The concepts of social, emotional, and identity development, which are byproducts of involvement in positive youth development programs, are not easy ones to measure, particularly using typical evaluation methodologies. But these less tangible outcomes — as opposed to ones like employment, earnings, or academic achievement — are particularly important to the youth

performance and program design and to support advocacy efforts on behalf of the program and low-income youth. YouthBuild USA, “Our Story” (Somerville, MA: YouthBuild USA), accessed April 2015, <http://www.youthbuild.org/our-story>.

⁶YouthBuild USA, email to authors, January 2015.

⁷Richard F. Catalano, M. Lisa Berglund, Jeanne A. M. Ryan, Heather S. Lonczak, and J. David Hawkins, “Positive Youth Development in the United States: Research Findings on Evaluations of Positive Youth Development Programs,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 591, no. 1 (January 2004): 98-124.

⁸YouthBuild USA Affiliated Network, *YouthBuild Program Design and Performance Standards* (Somerville, MA: YouthBuild USA Affiliated Network, 2013).

⁹This notion is supported by literature on youth development in which the cultivation of a clear and positive identity is seen as a crucial construct. Research also indicates that developing a positive identity is especially challenging for young people who are marginalized, especially minority youth. See Catalano et al. (2004).

development field more broadly and are a cornerstone for understanding the influence of YouthBuild on its participants.¹⁰

Over the years several studies have been conducted of YouthBuild. One of the first was a formative evaluation of the initial five YouthBuild replication sites, conducted from 1991 to 1994.¹¹ As part of this YouthBuild Demonstration Project, participants (trainees) were interviewed as they were nearing the end of their time in the program and asked to talk about how others would describe them. Some participants were also asked what the answer to the same question would have been a year earlier. Through this line of questioning, the trainees reflected on the transformation that others would perceive in them from the start to the conclusion of their YouthBuild participation. In many cases, the two answers were distinctly different. As documented in the evaluation report, Ronald F. Ferguson and Jason Snipes found that whether or not the young people completed their GED exams or received any particular certificate for achievement of new skills, they described themselves as more efficacious, optimistic, and morally upright than they had been a year earlier. The authors also shed light on the barriers to success faced by YouthBuild participants and detailed a framework for understanding why some youth achieved personal growth and positive identity development in YouthBuild but others left the program largely unaffected.

The following pages include a previously unpublished Ferguson and Snipes paper, written in 1997 and largely based on their contributions to the formative evaluation that was conducted between 1991 and 1994. The second paper in this report provides a contemporary look at YouthBuild as a transformational experience, but this time through the eyes of program directors. Using a new set of questions based on the findings of Ferguson and Snipes, MDRC surveyed and interviewed current YouthBuild program directors to determine whether the statements about youth transformation reported more than 20 years ago continue to ring true today. In this follow-up study, program directors largely reaffirmed what participants said: Many YouthBuild participants achieve considerable personal growth through participation in the program, and they view themselves, as well as their relationship to their families and their communities, more positively. Lacking direction when they first enter YouthBuild, a majority of the participants form concrete goals for their education, career, and personal development by the time they near the end of the program.

¹⁰Catalano and colleagues (2004) note that academic achievement, engagement in the workforce, and income are widely accepted positive outcomes associated with youth development but that there is no agreement on a complete set of positive youth development outcomes. In contrast, there are more standardized measures of negative behavior outcomes, for example, drug use, criminal activity, and truancy.

¹¹The sites were in Boston; Cleveland; Gary, Indiana; San Francisco; and Tallahassee, Florida. Ronald F. Ferguson and Philip L. Clay, with Jason C. Snipes and Phoebe Roaf, *YouthBuild in Developmental Perspective: A Formative Evaluation of the YouthBuild Demonstration Project* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Department of Urban Studies and Planning, 1996).

Neither of the research efforts presented in this paper offers rigorous evidence for the program's effect on participant outcomes such as educational attainment, employment, and earnings. With funding and direction from the U.S. Department of Labor, MDRC is currently conducting a random assignment evaluation of YouthBuild to estimate the program's impact on these tangible measures, among others, and preliminary findings are expected in 2017. Yet testimonials in both research efforts presented here suggest that traditional measures of program success and positive outcomes, while of utmost importance, may not fully reflect all the potential benefits of the program. Like many young people in a difficult labor market, graduates of the program will face obstacles to securing steady jobs that pay them living wages. But views from staff and participants presented in this report suggest that YouthBuild promotes personal development and social growth, and may give disadvantaged young people tools to navigate such adversities and persist in their efforts for a better life.

**A Framework for Understanding
Identity Development
Findings from YouthBuild Programs (1991-1994)**

**Ronald F. Ferguson
Jason Snipes**

The YouthBuild program serves 16- to 24-year-olds who are largely disconnected from mainstream institutions. They apply to the program seeking information, social supports, skills, connections, and hope. Three of every four participants are high school dropouts. YouthBuild provides counseling, basic reading and math skills, construction training for employability, and leadership training for citizenship.¹ In addition, the program promises job placement for those who finish successfully. Typically, a program cycle runs for roughly one year, full time, Monday through Friday. A site usually serves 30 to 40 young people per cycle in two teams of 15 to 20 participants who attend classes and the work site together. Currently, the majority of participants are African-American and Hispanic males.²

This paper develops a framework for understanding why some young people achieve personal growth and positive identity development in YouthBuild, while others leave the program largely unaffected. Erik Erikson's seminal ideas regarding stages of identity development over the human life cycle inform the core of the paper's conceptual framework. Here, however, instead of analyzing the *life* cycle, we adapt Erikson's ideas to understand a single *program* cycle of about one year. While it fits YouthBuild well, the framework is quite general. Its application to YouthBuild is only one among many potential ways to adapt Erikson's ideas in order to understand developmental processes for youth and adults alike in specific social and institutional settings.³

We focus on five developmental tasks. All are continually important, but one tends to be a higher priority for a person at any given time. The following is a list of the tasks in the sequence in which they become salient, phrased as they apply specifically to young people in a program such as YouthBuild:⁴

1. ***Trust versus mistrust.*** Learn to trust in the caring, competence, resourcefulness, and fairness of the YouthBuild staff and in the physical and emotional safety of the program environment among peers.

¹In YouthBuild, leadership means "taking responsibility for making things go right" in one's personal life, in one's family, in the YouthBuild program, and in the community. *Note:* This paper uses present tense to discuss YouthBuild as it was at the time of writing in 1997.

²Roughly two-thirds of trainees complete the program, with the site-specific rates ranging from about 45 percent to 80 percent, depending on the characteristics of trainees and sites. Young people whose experiences provide data for the paper live in mostly low-income inner-city neighborhoods and participate in YouthBuild programs in Boston, Massachusetts; San Francisco, California; Gary, Indiana; Cleveland, Ohio; and Tallahassee, Florida. The majority are black males, roughly 10 percent are female, and 20 percent are Latino. Only a small handful are white.

³For example, we have used the same basic model to discuss mentoring relationships. See Ferguson and Snipes (1994).

⁴Erikson's framework includes eight tasks. So far, our adaptation has considered only the first five.

2. ***Autonomy versus shame and doubt.*** Negotiate an acceptable range of autonomy in behavior and decision making, learning to respect the program's rules and to value guidance.
3. ***Initiative versus guilt.*** Initiate an honest attempt to collaborate with staff members and peers toward self-development, learning to cope with or to overcome any survivor's guilt and feelings of rejection by, or isolation from, one's old peer group.
4. ***Industry versus inferiority.*** Strive industriously to learn new strategies for living and to master new skills, including skills for employability and skills required for the General Educational Development (GED) certificate, a high school degree, or college entrance exams.
5. ***Identity versus identity confusion.*** Resolve any tensions between old and new beliefs about one's self. Assimilate a focused and positive identity that fosters a healthy lifestyle, internal satisfaction with one's self, and a sense of positive expectancy about one's future.

In this logical sequence, the information and social relations developed through each task facilitate each subsequent task. Among many important lessons, a few simple propositions emerge as themes:

- Readiness to exercise self-discipline both inside and outside of the program environment seems to be greater among older trainees and appears to be the most fundamental difference between participants who succeed at the tasks outlined above and those who do not.
- Traits that distinguish more effective from less effective teachers and counselors in helping participants through these tasks include respect for young people, skill at responding appropriately when they test boundaries, and great patience.
- At every stage, models and advisers who have successfully broken free from the street life are critically important for some young people who need both advice on how to complete the break and reassurance that they are not "selling out" by making the effort.

This paper is one among several products of the YouthBuild Demonstration Project of the early 1990s. The project collected both quantitative and qualitative data. The qualitative data include 200 one-on-one interviews with staff and program participants across two program cycles and five sites. Below, passages from interviews help to illustrate ways that

participants experience the various developmental tasks that are the focus of the model that this paper explicates.

The first section of the paper introduces distinctions concerning levels of maturity and “conventionality” among trainees at the time that they enter the program. This leads into a discussion of “readiness” for YouthBuild. Subsequent sections explain the ways that we have adapted Erikson’s framework to analyze YouthBuild, arriving at a version that we distinguish by labeling it the Ferguson/Snipes (FS) model. Again, this model is useful beyond understanding YouthBuild. Its broader importance abides in the potential for similar applications in a wide range of institutional settings, including schools, workplaces, and civic organizations. The paper ends by summarizing major themes.

Differences Among Youth

Before beginning a more substantive discussion of what young people experience in YouthBuild, it is important to establish at the outset that participants differ widely in the quality of their relationships and in the knowledge and other assets that they have at the time they enter the program. We use the word “competence” to represent assets that reside within the person, such as knowledge, attitudes, instrumental values, skills, and habits. By “instrumental values,” we mean, for example, the conviction that loyalty to peers is a moral imperative. This conviction is instrumental because living by it, or not, can mean the difference between life and death for young people in a world of gang rivalries. “Social supports” are the assets that reside within the participant’s network of relationships. The important point is that some youth have competencies and social supports that tend to foster success in YouthBuild, and others have competencies and social supports that tend to be impediments. The latter tend to behave in ways that are more “unconventional” by mainstream standards. They face greater challenges in YouthBuild.

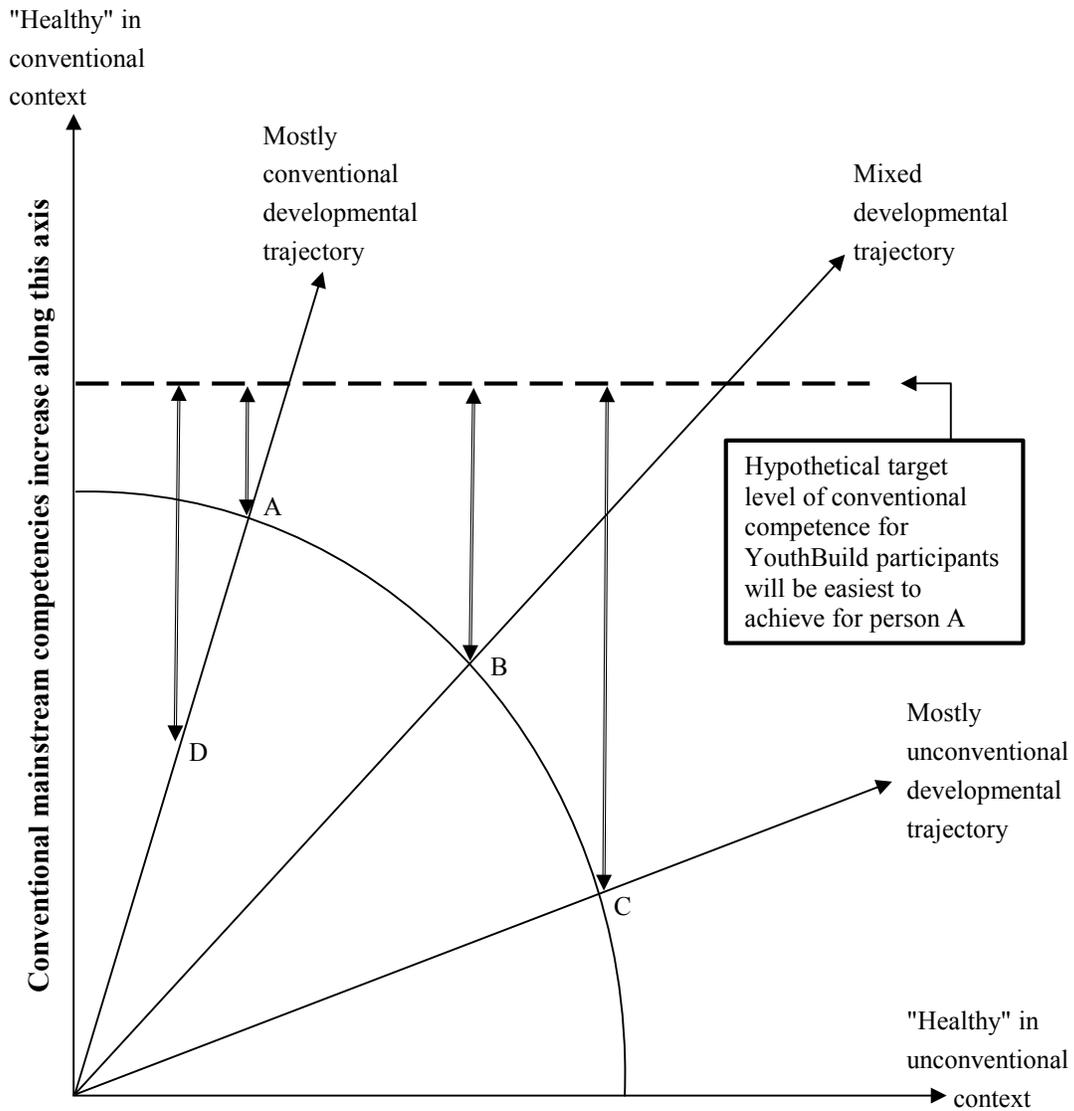
Maturity and conventionality are key concepts. Figure 1 shows their relationship to one another in our thinking. Young people will develop various levels of maturity in whatever social settings they occupy. In any social setting, achieving “maturity” entails accumulating competencies and social supports that facilitate longevity and success by the standards of that setting. Consider two polar types of settings — “conventional” and “unconventional” — defined by mainstream standards. Competencies and social supports that serve well in one may be counterproductive in the other.

In Figure 1, points farther to the right represent higher levels of competence of the type that fosters healthy survival in unconventional settings. Conversely, moving upward represents increasing conventional competence. Notice the points A, B, and C. Each lies along an arrow that points outward, representing a developmental trajectory. A person whose competencies are

YouthBuild (1991-1994)

Figure 1

**Pursuing Conventional Personal Growth
from Four Alternative Initial Combinations
of Conventional and Unconventional Competencies**



Unconventional competencies increase along this axis
(For example, competencies that foster survival in the "street life")

farther out in the direction that the arrow points is more mature. Each arrow combines conventional and unconventional competencies in some unique proportion — consistent hypothetically with some corresponding social context. Points farther out along each arrow represent greater levels of maturity for the contexts where the particular combination of skills is most functional.

Points A, B, and C also lie along an arc whose distance from the origin is the same at every point. In some “universal” sense, every point on the arc corresponds to one uniform maturity in that each is the same distance from the origin. In this sense, A, B, and C are equally mature but have developed differently because they have been in different environments. Point D is on the same arrow as A. Clearly, point A represents greater competence and maturity than point D. Comparisons among the other three points produce different rankings, however, depending upon the context. It is only by the standards of the environment in which A exists that the person at point C is clearly less competent than those at points A and D. Nevertheless, for any given target level of *conventional* development in the YouthBuild program, a person who begins at point C has much further to grow. Below, we show how this affects the way he experiences the program.

Throughout the rest of the paper, the text refers occasionally to youths of types A, B, and C, as illustrated in Figure 1, to indicate contrasts in conventionality. All three may be high school dropouts. Generally, however, type A respects conventional authority and believes firmly that effort and knowledge will be more important than luck in determining the quality of his life. He has basic conventional competencies at the ninth-grade level or higher, mostly conventional social supports, and fairly well-defined goals that he believes his participation in the program will serve. Type C may or may not believe that effort can pay off for him in mainstream society, his conventional competencies are quite weak (for example, below seventh-grade level), he has few conventional social supports, and his conventional goals are amorphous, at best. Much of his recent life has been “on the streets,” including illegal employment and associated social relations. His appearance at the YouthBuild program is the result of a recent and perhaps unstable resolve to change his life. Again, these are prototypes that help to shorten the exposition. Actual young people span a much wider range of combinations.

“Readiness” for YouthBuild

We assume in what follows that the conscious or not-so-conscious motivation for most of human behavior, including decisions by some young people to embrace street life, is the desire to experience satisfaction along very basic human dimensions. According to motivational psychologists, these dimensions include biological impulses to find and experience achievement,

influence, affiliation, and security.⁵ People gravitate to locations and activities — indeed, they learn skills and imitate practices — that seem likely to produce these fundamental satisfactions.

However, before someone will focus industriously on a given path to fulfillment, that path needs to seem both feasible and superior to other available alternatives. Feasibility entails knowing some *strategy* (that is, some set of things to do) and having (or acquiring) the necessary *skills* for implementing the strategy.⁶ When a person has a strategy and the skills to implement it and perceives that the potential rewards warrant the effort, he is inclined to become “engaged” — resolutely focused — toward the goal of reaping those rewards. The reverse is true as well.

Youths of type C are typically those who decide at some point, often based on experience, that school and conventional settings have little to offer in terms, for example, of achievement, influence, affiliation, or security. At that time, street life has greater allure. Eventually, most learn that fulfillment on the streets is fleeting and overrated. Street life, they learn, is incompatible with other goals of a more conventional nature that become more salient with age, such as being a good parent and staying alive. Learning this lesson may require bouts with drug addiction, time in jail, being shot, seeing friends die, and more.

Ultimately, young people reach a time when, correctly or not, they think they are “ready” for alternatives that give them a path toward conventional forms of opportunity.⁷ Sometimes incarceration and substance abuse programs help them achieve this state of readiness. Others are ready for YouthBuild because their past employment has been menial and dead-end. Often they have tried both legal and illegal work and decided that neither can be satisfying with their current skill levels.

As discussed in a later section, young people who are not ready when they enter the program often fall by the wayside in the early months. Hence, screening out youths who are not ready (but may be ready later) and selecting those who are is a focus of well-run programs during the period of recruitment and selection. The programs in Boston and San Francisco, in particular, put a great deal of effort into screening for trainees who, despite troubled backgrounds, nevertheless seemed ready. According to the program director in San Francisco:

⁵Motivational psychologists differ in the words that they use and in the number of basic motives that they identify. Most, however, include motives that correspond to those listed here. See, for example, McClelland (1987).

⁶The idea that knowing a feasible “strategy” is key to achieving engagement toward a particular goal is emphasized in Skinner, Wellborn, and Connell (1990). Related ideas appear in Ferguson (1994).

⁷It is well established in the literature on criminology, for example, that males tend to age out of criminal behavior as they become young adults. For example, see Steffensmeir, Allan, Harer, and Streifel (1989).

We made it clear [just as other sites did] that there'd be no penalty for admission of drug use and no penalty for criminal records. In fact, there might be some benefit in having a criminal record. . . . We asked questions designed to tell us about their sincerity, self-awareness, willingness to work with others, and their commitment.

Indeed, San Francisco's director was inclined to focus on youths who were more like type C as defined above, as long as they were ready to move in a more conventional direction. These young people, he reasoned, were the least likely to find alternative opportunities.

Officials in Boston, on the other hand, viewed it as too difficult to deal with a preponderance of type Cs. Boston aimed at more of a balanced mix of type Cs, Bs, and As. Still, the intent was to not to "cream," but to take young people who truly needed the program and who were ready to "get humble" in expressing their readiness to participate. As a staff member reports it:

We were looking for people who were really willing to get humble, and put their stuff on the line and really put their hearts up there and say what they really wanted to do. If we could do that in an interview and they could get real and start telling us things, then we felt they were reachable. Versus a couple that came in, they were so hard that you couldn't. The barrier — you couldn't break the barrier.

We came out of interviews crying. Every night. Young men were saying, "This is my only chance. Please." I mean, they were crying. I was crying. . . . And it was so hard making the decisions. I get water in my eyes just thinking about it. . . . "Why were you acting the way you were before? What do you need to see in your life right now?" And one kid says, "I need a partner like you to care about me." God man, it was just breaking me down.

A young man from the same site reports:

I just came off and let them know, you know, my details — where I been through, that I really wanted to learn somethin. I was *ready*. I wasn't ready to fool around no more. I was ready to . . . shift in gear and get this thing going, you know? . . . That's what it really means to be ready, when you're ready to *give up* whatever you have to give up to get what you want.

Even when youths are supposedly ready, however, competencies from the streets can result in miscalculations. For example, the habit of suspicion may be a survival skill around people who earn their living through illegal activity, but it can prevent an applicant from being sufficiently open during the YouthBuild interview. Those who make this mistake may not be admitted to the program. Even if they are admitted, the admissions process is a small hurdle compared with what follows.

The next sections address what happens in the program as participants and staff members work together, sometimes successfully and sometimes not, through the various stages of relationship building and personal development. Throughout the rest of the paper, the word “staff” will refer to all program personnel, including executive directors, program managers, instructors, and counselors, unless otherwise indicated.

Adapting Erikson’s Framework

Erik Erikson proposes that people face eight distinguishable developmental tasks as they pass through the “Eight Ages of Man,” from birth through late adulthood.⁸ Each task has an upside and a downside — a positive and a negative potential. While several tasks may be important at any given time, one will tend to be most salient. This “most salient” task defines the “stage” through which the individual is considered to be passing.

During each stage, people experience what Erikson calls “the whole critical alternative” between positive and negative outlooks, intuitions, or feelings regarding themselves and their relationship to the social context. If the developmental task associated with a particular stage is not resolved positively, then negative or ambivalent irresolution has detrimental consequences for later stages. Hence, healthy human development at every stage in life depends on the healthy resolution of challenges associated with earlier developmental tasks.

YouthBuild offers a moratorium during which young people with unresolved issues from earlier stages in life can revisit them. Resolution, if it ever occurs at all, is never permanent. People repeatedly revisit tasks as they move through life because events call previous resolutions into question or, more often, render them incomplete. The Ferguson/Snipes (FS) model makes explicit the process by which people revisit the tasks in Erikson’s model each time that they encounter a new social context — a school, a program, a job, or any other environment — where, over time, they must rely on others to help them in the process of personal development.⁹

⁸See Erikson (1963). The eight “ages” are trust versus mistrust (infancy); autonomy versus doubt and shame (early childhood); initiative versus guilt (preschool childhood); industry versus inferiority (school age); identity versus identity confusion (adolescence); intimacy versus isolation (late adolescence and early adulthood); generativity versus stagnation (middle adulthood); and integrity versus despair (middle to late adulthood).

⁹This paper focuses on the experience of young people. The same basic framework might alternatively be used to understand the experience of staff members. They, too, must confront the social environment of the program and find ways to experience personal development in this context.

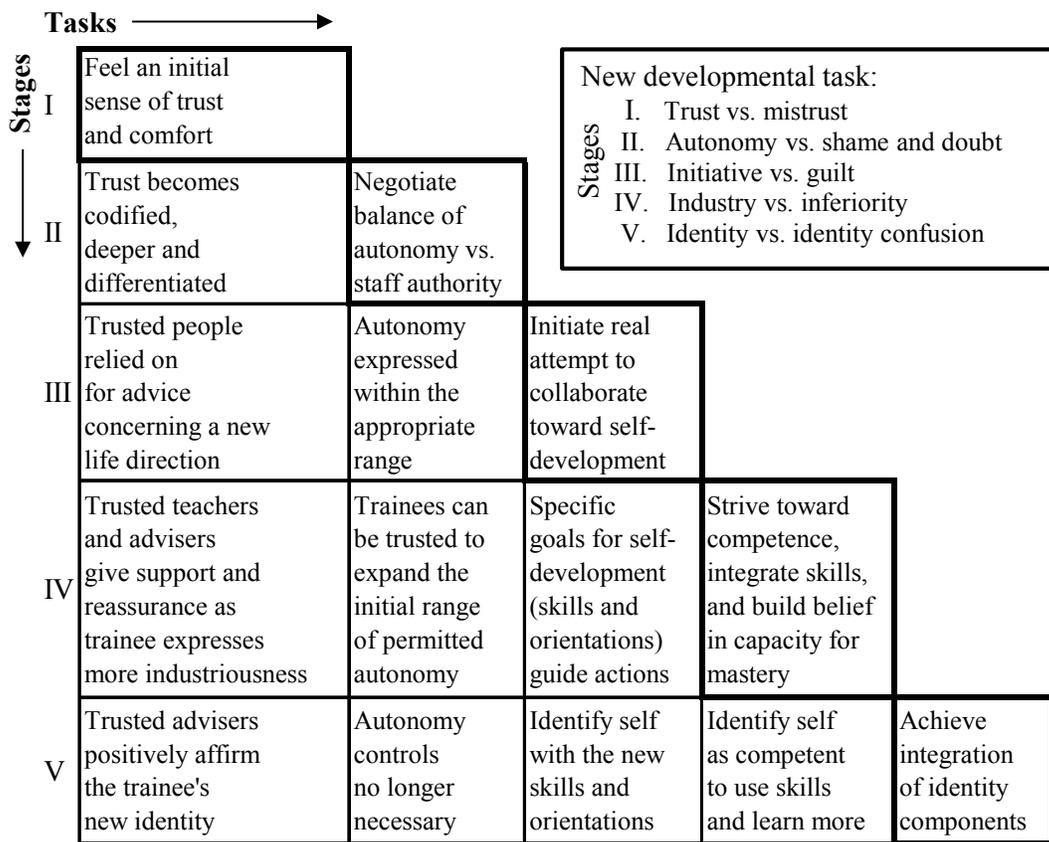
Figure 2 summarizes the tasks and stages in the FS model.¹⁰ We refer back to it repeatedly in what follows. Each row represents a stage; each introduces a new task that was not salient in the prior stage. Each column represents a task; consecutive rows of each column show the evolution of each task as the participant moves to later stages. While the process applies to every youth who participates in YouthBuild, each will experience it in a unique way for reasons introduced above in defining types A, B, and C.

YouthBuild (1991-1994)

Figure 2

Stages in a Youth's Development in the YouthBuild Program and Associated Developmental Tasks

Each stage builds upon old tasks and introduces a new task



¹⁰For another analysis that outlines stages in working with youth, see Fox (1985). The stages that Fox identifies from his experience working with urban gangs are remarkably similar to those that we address here.

Each section below opens with a statement relating the task in the FS framework to the task of the same name in Erikson's work. Then each section addresses some of the major issues that young people face in YouthBuild, using the FS model to structure the presentation.

Stage One: Trust Versus Mistrust

The earliest task in Erikson's model is to resolve the conflict "trust versus mistrust" that gives the first stage its name. Concentrated during infancy, positive resolution of this conflict depends heavily on development of a strong maternal bond through which the child develops a sense that care and love are shared reciprocally between human beings. In addition, the child learns that loved ones are dependable. "The infant's first social achievement, then, is his willingness to let the mother out of sight without undue anxiety or rage, because she has become an inner certainty as well as an outer predictability" (Erikson 1963, p. 247). Conversely, infants who fail to experience consistency and continuity from their earliest caregivers are at risk for developing a propensity to feel insecure — a sense of mistrust. The trust that develops at this stage is a sense of security — not an articulated belief.

In the FS model for YouthBuild, "trust versus mistrust" is the first "critical alternative" that the trainee faces as he or she encounters the program. It begins at the first contact and may be unresolved for the first few days or weeks into the program. Many young people at this stage are quite passive — they observe and experience the program but make little if any effort to test or to influence it. "Am I safe here? Do I like this? Are these people honest? Should I stay?" are questions that participants may ask themselves. The challenge is to achieve a sense of comfort and positive expectancy. Passages below emphasize that establishing expectations of physical and emotional safety are key. Early demonstrations of the staff's effective problem-solving abilities are important as well. Perhaps most important, young people look for signals that YouthBuild is not like other institutions, particularly schools, that have been disappointing in the past. Trainees continually update their initial impressions over the opening days and weeks of the program.

Orientation

Each site conducts an orientation program at the beginning, typically lasting between four days and two weeks. Generally, any unexcused absence during orientation results in automatic expulsion from the program. When designed well, orientation activities pay careful attention to breaking down barriers that might exist by neighborhood origin, ethnicity, or gender. They are very effective at beginning to build the atmosphere that programs call "family." Activities as simple as tossing a ball around a circle and calling out the name of the person to whom you are tossing the ball are surprising in their effectiveness at raising the level of interpersonal comfort.

Additional activities engage trainees in discussions of topics that require them to be introspective and help them to understand better the reasons that YouthBuild is where they need to be at this time in their lives. Staff members review the types of mistakes that people make that send their lives off course, and help trainees to understand the roles of race and social class, as well as misguided attitudes that adults hold about children, in contributing to their past experiences. Both youths and staff members talk personally about themselves in small groups and with the program as a whole. By the end of orientation, trainees have an initial familiarity with one another and with the staff. In addition, they understand better their own reasons for being in the program and what they can expect over the coming months if they do their part.

It is also during this period that participants become familiar with the contract that defines the program's rules, including what the staff expects of them and what they should expect from the staff. At some sites, each youth and each staff member signs the contract. Over the first few months, it is likely that trainees will challenge the contract and, in some cases, participate with the staff and director in revising it.

Is YouthBuild “For Real”?

Among the more important achievements of an effective orientation is that, by the end, the trainees have learned to believe that YouthBuild is “for real.” Most say that school was not, because teachers in regular school seldom really cared whether they learned. Interview after interview in all five cities of the demonstration project told the same story: Students report that with a few notable exceptions, teachers in regular school gave them scant encouragement, had little or no patience, gave almost no individualized attention, communicated no joy of learning, and delivered lessons that were unstimulating. Commonly, young people report, teachers assigned work that students did not know how to do and moved rapidly through lesson plans without regard to whether the class understood the lessons.¹¹

The following are representative statements, one from each site.

Trainee 1: In high school they don't care. They just want to get paid.

Trainee 2: Well, the teachers don't really care if you learn or not, at the school I went to anyway.

¹¹It is important to remember here that these youths are high school dropouts. They are likely to come from the lowest academic tracks and to be the students from whom teachers expect the least. Hence, their experiences will be worse than those of the average student in the same schools. For a review of relevant literature that includes several citations on the negative effects of ability tracking, see National Research Council (1995), chapter 6. For an analysis that compares the experience and perspectives of three young people in an urban high school, one of whom is academically “disaffected,” see Crichlow (1992).

Trainee 3: In English class it was like, you read a story and then you answer the questions afterwards. That's it. That was it. . . . Didn't really teach you anything.

Trainee 4: And people get up, walk out of class. If you don't feel like being in it then don't go there. He doesn't really care. He never really cared.

Trainee 5: I mean teachers in high school . . . they're there to get a paycheck, you know what I'm saying. Then they'll pick a student that they like. It will be more a social thing they doing instead of an actual job.

As detailed later, most reports about teachers in YouthBuild are the polar opposites of the examples above. While teachers in YouthBuild are not saints, the following sentiment from an instructor at one of the demonstration sites is typical.

I think that's probably the secret to my success, that I'm able to identify, to relate, to have the patience to deal with them on a daily basis, and they're not used to that. . . . To hang in there, and to come back after you have a bad day, to come back with just as much energy as when you left, and continue on. A lot of them are used to people giving up on them, hence they give up on themselves.

Further, openness about themselves is a sign that teachers in YouthBuild seek not to maintain the alienating social distance kept by many teachers in regular school. Uniformly across the sites, students in YouthBuild expect teachers not only to give full disclosure about themselves, but also to relate to students as "family," not as professional service providers.

Early Problem Solving

The "family" ambiance grows rapidly when staff members help with problems that appear to be above and beyond their formal responsibilities. Examples accumulate through the early weeks of the program as staff members help trainees to organize their lives logistically for participation in the program. Knowing that this assistance is available fosters a sense of security among trainees. Staff members and trainees alike begin using the word "family" to describe the environment. The particular events that drive this process arise from the natural rhythms of life in and around the program and are never the same twice. While circumstances vary, the constant is the staff's preparedness to do almost whatever is required to help trainees get a smooth start in the program.

This example is from Gary:

Staff member: When 97 percent of these guys walked through the door, this staff became everything, Mamma, Daddy, Uncle, best friend, cousin, whatever.

Interviewer: How fast did that happen?

Staff member: End of the first week of orientation. That Thursday, in fact, one of the trainees had a brother die. He was about three months old. The family knew

nothing about putting together a funeral. Making arrangements, who to call, where to get flowers, any of that. Ms. Best and I and the other teacher got together and made telephone calls. Ms. Brooks got involved, you know. And we helped the family make arrangements, I mean you would have thought that it was our family that had a death.

And from there, everything just busted open. It's like the trainees thought, "Well if they can do that for him, I've got a problem here and there and I need help, you know." And it really became, it became a family — I mean, it became a family.

Similar attitudes existed at other sites.

One young woman in the San Francisco program had financial trouble as the program began; she could not pay her rent:

Trainee: YouthBuild paid my rent a couple of months. . . . 'Cause I started working [that is, enrolled at YouthBuild] and I reported it to my social worker. And my social worker cut my check a lot. She was makin' a mistake, 'cause she was sayin' I was makin' too much money, and I wasn't, and I wasn't able to pay my rent. And I told [the counselor] about it, and then . . . [the director] was across the street eatin' I remember. And we walked over there, and [the director] was like, "We'll pay her rent for the next couple of months." I was like "Ooh! Okay!"

Interviewer: So that surprised you?

Trainee: Yeah, that surprised me to *death!* And [the director] is *always* comin' out the pocket though. With his own money. He always, all the time. He — I think God sent me to YouthBuild, to tell you the truth.

Events such as these are powerful experiences for trainees. Outside of YouthBuild, trainees often lack bonds with adults who have the wisdom and resources to solve problems. The contrast can be stark. As unsolicited evidence of caring and effectiveness accumulates, trust grows, and young people become more confident that YouthBuild is where they belong. This process can also work in reverse. Signs of indifference or disdain or an overly punitive program culture may lead trainees to feel that staff members do not deserve their trust and respect. Negative signs in one-on-one relationships between youths and staff members include failure to make eye contact, failure to listen, or trainee misinterpretations of early disciplinary actions. The latter can be particularly harmful for type C trainees (the more unconventional, as defined above), because it confirms their negative expectations.

Expectations of physical and emotional safety and knowledge that staff members are available to help with logistical problems can develop rapidly during the first week or two of the program, when becoming comfortable is the major task. During these first few weeks, trainees

tend to be on their best behavior. However, a period of more variable behavior follows. We turn now to that period.

Stage Two: Autonomy Versus Shame and Doubt

The second major task in Erikson's life-cycle model is called "autonomy versus shame and doubt." It is salient in early childhood. The child at this stage has, as Erikson writes, "a sudden violent wish to have a choice" (Erikson 1963, p. 252). However, as the child exerts a relatively untamed will, he or she may experience shame and doubt. Shame is embarrassment — the feeling that one wants to shrink from the judgmental view of those who would condemn his behaviors. Doubt is troubling uncertainty, especially regarding the possibility of good outcomes. To avoid habitual and routine feelings of shame and doubt, children need to sense a balance between their autonomy and external controls. As Erikson writes, "From a sense of self-control without loss of self-esteem comes a lasting sense of good will and pride; from a sense of loss of self-control and of foreign over-control comes a lasting propensity for doubt and shame" (Erikson 1963, p. 254). Children who come successfully through this stage sense that they should respect rules and expect fairness and justice from people in positions of authority. Especially when parents and others in positions of authority are unfair or inconsistent, the child can develop feelings of shame and doubt, and this can interfere with future healthy development.

The second stage in the FS model is also labeled "autonomy versus shame and doubt." The task in YouthBuild is to achieve a balance between the authority of the staff and the rules of the organization versus the will of the program participants to do as they wish. This stage corresponds to the second row of Figure 2, both columns. The consensus of staff members at a meeting for YouthBuild Boston was that stable resolution of this stage may take up to five months. Trainees during this stage will test the program in order to discover where the real boundaries lie. Some will act out or purposefully break the rules; others will simply ask questions. Shame may be the result when participants misbehave sufficiently that they, on reflection, are embarrassed by their own actions. Doubt results when youths test themselves or the staff in ways that produce evidence calling into question whether they have the ability to succeed in the program.

The second stage also includes a continuation of trust building, augmenting the initial work of the "trust versus mistrust" stage. Trust becomes deeper and more differentiated. Implicitly and explicitly, trainees ask what we call "the four trust questions" about each staff member and about the program more generally: (1) Can I trust these people to care about me? (2) Can I trust these people to be competent — to know what they are talking about? (3) Can I trust these people to be resourceful and dependable enough to keep their promises? and (4) Can I trust that these people will be pleasant to work with — that they will respect me and be fair? If the answers are generally affirmative and if young people find the appropriate balance between asserting their personal autonomy and respecting the external controls of the program, then this sec-

ond stage achieves a positive resolution. Implicitly, youths are saying to the staff, “I will yield some control over my autonomy if you will prove to me that I can trust you.” As this stage begins, some staff members may seem deserving, and some may not.

We say that the first two stages, “trust versus mistrust” and “autonomy versus shame and doubt,” constitute a period of increasing “social engagement.” To “engage” something is to become involved with it in a focused way. During these first two stages, young people are focused primarily on becoming enmeshed in the social relations of the program rather than on achieving more instrumental goals.

Scheming to “Get Over” Versus to “Get Ahead”

It is not unusual during the first several months for trainees to have difficulty conforming their behavior to the requirements of the program. The difficulty is multidimensional. First, the more unconventional their lifestyles have been, the more habits they have that are at odds with what the program requires. Second, many of the same trainees have difficulty allowing others to define the terms of agreements; they resist ultimatums from authority figures. Trainees who represent the worst cases of this are not “ready” for YouthBuild. When they are identified during the admissions process, they are not admitted. If they get through the admissions screen, they either change or they fall by the wayside.

The first example below concerns a participant who missed a day of the program and then refused to tell the truth about the reason. The trainee told the staff and students that he was in jail that day, but some of his peers had seen him leaving a liquor store. The program manager wrote up a contract concerning his future behavior, and he refused to sign it. The program manager tells the story:

And then when we gave him an ultimatum to sign this contract, he refused to sign the contract. And so we . . . said, “Well, look, I don’t think there’s much more we can do for you here.” When I asked him to leave, his peers came to me and said “Wait a minute, why are you doin that to him.” . . . He always had conditions on how to work with him. You could only work with him under certain conditions. Like, “We can talk about my case, but we can’t do it in private.” . . . But when it was time to get the students on his side, he didn’t want to put his stuff out on the floor. I said, “Look, I’ll only deal with you if we put you out on the table, just as you are.” So the reality of what happened was when we did throw it on the table, I knew he was guilty. But it was almost more important to let them [the other students] know that too. . . .

If he’d have understood what it was to be humble. Because at that point, they [other students] asked, “Well, if he comes back and apologizes, can he come back?” I think I even said, “Yeah.” But he couldn’t do it. . . . Here’s a person who probably spent — and this is something I want all y’all [the trainees in the

room] to really think about — he spent more time trying to figure out how to get *over* than trying to get *ahead*. And that's probably one of the characteristics of a lot of times some young people. They will spend more time trying to get *over* than trying to get ahead, when it doesn't take as much effort to just get ahead. 'Cause you sit there and scheme and you plan, you think, and you figure, "How am I gonna do this? What am I gonna tell them?" when all you gotta do is just do it, just do it right the first time, and you're finished.

The interviewer asks, "Does that make sense to the trainees?" A trainee answers,

Yeah it does, but you gotta look at it. When you start out, though, most of us, man, that's all we started with was scheming. So you can't just expect to flip the coin, man, and, you know, in that short of an amount of time, and expect somebody to change like that. It's not like that. Speaking for myself, 'cause, you know, scheming, that's how I went through just about everything I did, *and* did it in YouthBuild . . .

Interviewer: You *still* do that?

Trainee: No, not as much.

Interviewer: Well why don't you, and when did you stop?

Trainee: Um, I stopped scheming as much when I started getting close to my partner down there at the end [the construction manager]. 'Cause I just didn't understand why they kept tryin to help me. . . . Something was wrong . . . I'm like, "Why are these people wantin to help me?" You know what I'm sayin? "Let me just *do* this." You know? "I know what I'm doin." But when it finally sank in . . . that's when I started spending less time on trying to get over, and just [saying], "Hey, alright, I don't know what I'm doing. Show me." And things've been pickin up for me ever since.

This example illustrates the contrast between successful and unsuccessful resolution of the autonomy stage. The trainee who lied about the reason for his absence chose to leave the program rather than sign a behavioral contract with the program manager. This was a failure of the trainee and the staff to negotiate a range of control that was broad enough to be tolerable for the student yet narrow enough to support the trainee's progress. The trainee's termination from the program was the result.

On the other hand, the trainee who spoke of "scheming" shows the importance of trusting relationships between trainees and staff members. He stopped scheming because he came to trust in the almost unconditional support of staff members who seemed determined to help him. He decided to admit his ignorance and to place himself under their guidance. His case provides a good example of the way that resolution of autonomy issues depends on the resolution of trust issues.

Discipline Is a Balancing Act

As discussed earlier, trainees tend to be on their best behavior for the one or two weeks of orientation. Afterward, the testing that trainees do for the next few months requires a balancing act from the staff (including the director and program manager). Staff members need to be firm enough to maintain control of the program, but not so firm as to seem oppressive. They need to be flexible, but not so flexible as to seem vulnerable.

The YouthBuild Demonstration Project produced examples of staff who were too overbearing and others who were too meek. For example, a particular instructor who taught basic skills was ineffective in the early months because he was unable to command respect and had little control over his classroom. When asked why they “dogged” the instructor a group answered, “Because we can.” Autonomy issues in this man’s classroom were not progressing toward an acceptable resolution. Eventually, the director responded to the problem by moving one of the counselors into the classroom to share the teaching duties. The role of the original instructor diminished, and he was not rehired the next year.

At the opposite extreme, a staff member at another site quickly earned a reputation among trainees for being “too hard on people.” A trainee who was one of her defenders says,

Yeah, she’s hard but she has to be. Most fellas in here, they come off the streets and they ain’t used to somebody telling them what do. They not going to do it if you don’t tell them so, you know, you got to constantly stay on them about doing something. So, it’s more or less where she stands, it’s like a mother. Your mother’s always telling you to go ahead and do this, do that, but you just lazy. And then, you feel she’s just being mean or just telling, you know. That’s all it is.”

However, the story is not so simple.

The following passage recounts an event during which she was disrespectful to a trainee and he was disrespectful in return. It shows that resolution of autonomy issues sometimes requires more self-discipline from staff members as well as from trainees. Both the teacher and the student probably experienced the downside of “autonomy versus shame and doubt”: Both were probably ashamed of their behavior and both probably had some doubts about whether they could continue working together. As the trainee tells the story,

[She] was in a bad mood, and . . . she gave us some work that didn’t nobody know nothin about. So, I asked her, I said, well, I asked what was the purpose for this. She cursed at me. She was like, “Ain’t none of your damn business, what the purpose is.” You know, she was like, “Just do it. Don’t ask questions.” So . . . I said, “You ain’t my mamma. Don’t be cursin at me. What you think this is?” And she was like, “I’m a grown woman, you don’t talk to me like that.” I said, “I don’t give a damn *who* you *are*, you don’t talk to *me* like that.” So we just went back and forth, back and forth. So then she stood up. I said, “What you standin

your big ass up for, like you fittin to *do* somethin?" She walked on out of the room. . . . [Later], we — she apologized and everything and I apologized, so we got back cool and everything.

Both he and the teacher behaved improperly and both acknowledged soon afterward that a different standard of behavior was warranted. Both say that they learned a lesson — resolved some autonomy issues — that helped them to work together more effectively for the rest of the program.

Generally, because of sexism by male participants, women on the staff face greater challenges earning respect than do most men. Especially during their first few months on the job, some female staffers adopt overly gruff demeanors in reaction to actual or expected disrespect from male youths. They eventually “mellow out,” but not without working with trainees to find a mutually acceptable way of relating to one another.

The discussion above concerns the stage called “autonomy versus shame and doubt,” represented by the second line of Figure 2. The central task of this stage is resolved when trainees and staff together find an appropriate balance between the trainee’s exercise of discretion and the program’s imposition of structure and control. Trainees will not continue to allow this external control if they do not trust that staff members are caring, competent, honest about their ability to deliver what they promise, and fair and respectful. When “doubt” concerning potential working relationships or “shame” from inappropriate behavior raises tensions, positive resolutions can allow progress to continue. However, patently negative resolutions (for example, the young man who refused to sign the contract) typically lead trainees to quit the program or to be dismissed.

The next section concerns the third line of Figure 2. Tasks associated with the first two stages remain foundational and continue to evolve, but a different task takes center stage.

Stage Three: Initiative Versus Guilt

The third task in Erikson’s life-cycle framework is called “initiative versus guilt.” The stage when this task is most salient occurs during the preschool years. Erikson writes, “Initiative adds to autonomy the quality of undertaking, planning and ‘attacking’ a task for the sake of being active and on move” (Erikson 1963, p. 255). While this is generally normal and healthy, the danger at this stage is that children will develop a sense of guilt over the goals that they contemplate or the actions that they take. Guilt for a small child might come from purposely harming or planning to harm a sibling or parent or from seeking to gain an unfair or immoral advantage. The idea or the act offends the child’s own sense of right and wrong. While shame, associated with the previous stage, is the desire to hide from external disapproval, guilt is the product of conscience. With guilt, the disapproval is internal. Both shame and guilt can retard healthy

development. The successful child in this stage finds ways of taking initiative that do not result routinely in pangs of guilt.

The stage of “initiative versus guilt” in YouthBuild, using the FS model, concerns initiation in earnest of the search for personal development in the context of the program. Before this stage, trainees were focused on fitting in socially, on learning the strengths and weaknesses of the staff members and their peers, and on determining which rules were real. As one program manager put it, many trainees during the early stages are focused on “getting over” rather than on “getting ahead.” “Initiative versus guilt” is the stage when trust and autonomy are sufficiently well established that “getting ahead” can become the more salient concern.

Guilt, often “survivor’s guilt,” is the downside. It comes, for example, from contemplating goals or taking actions that seem to betray or to abandon friends, family, and social class affiliations. Trainees wonder whether it is fair for them to have such aspirations or to reap the benefits of a program that brothers, sisters, and friends may deserve as much as they do. If the first two stages of the youth’s development have reached positive resolutions, staff members and peers in the program are available to help the trainee to resolve this guilt. Positive resolution of this stage comes when the participant finds and adopts aspirations and behaviors that do not provoke pangs of conscience and ambivalence. Often, the challenge is to find strong ethical justifications for the goals under consideration and ways of interpreting personal progress as being in the best interest of loved ones.

At this stage the trainee begins to rely honestly on members of the staff to provide advice, assistance, and reassurance. Questions are more often serious — no longer intended to test the staff’s competence. The youths have come to believe the program is a reliable vehicle, and now they really want it to help them to go somewhere. Their most salient questions to themselves and to the staff become, “What should I do with this opportunity and with my life?” and “Am I ‘selling out’ by wanting to rise up in the world?”

Violating Norms

Before YouthBuild, the trainee lived by a set of norms and values that he internalized, at least partially, as legitimate. These norms may have included such rules as “You don’t abandon your friends” and “You don’t ‘sell out’ by aspiring to emulate people who look down on your kind.” These are familiar themes from the work of anthropologists like John Ogbu who write of “oppositional cultures” among socially marginalized groups.¹² Even in the inner city, however, young people vary in the degree to which their identities are oppositional to mainstream society. For example, trainees resembling type A from Figure 1 may have less ambiva-

¹²See, for example, Ogbu (1978).

lence because their friends are already quite conventional in their orientations. Type A may not feel as put down by mainstream society. Especially within their own race, people from mainstream society have probably been more accepting of them than of type C and they have probably already developed an identification with them.

Conversely, youths of type C may have developed an oppositional identity that regards mainstream society as the source of false promises and the sanctuary of people who feel superior because they assume that others, such as these youths, are inferior. (Recall the discussion of public school teachers' attitudes, above.) Type C has skills and social supports that, by and large, do not fit well with mainstream society. For a young person who is more like type C, success in mainstream society may seem to require abandoning or betraying the friends and values that gave life structure and legitimacy.

Resulting feelings of confusion and guilt can retard initiative. Therefore, among the most critical challenges for trainees at this stage is to understand their involvement with previous lifestyles, relationships, and values in terms that free them to continue making progress toward mainstream success without feeling guilty. *Finding conventional goals that have moral legitimacy and finding moral legitimacy in conventional goals is the major work of this stage.*

The leadership component of the YouthBuild program was not motivated initially to help young people overcome guilt. Nevertheless, it can aid in this purpose. The idea that one will "take responsibility for making things go right" for family, friends, and community can give moral legitimacy to efforts at personal development that give one the ability to serve. Ideally, the trainee learns to see his new relationship to his family, community, old peers, and old values as one that is both righteous and positive. Some old peers and some old values must be dropped, but only because they stand in the way of a greater good.

In the process of stepping off in a new direction, trainees may also face up to the immorality of old behaviors, since they no longer have a stake in rationalizing their continuation. Interestingly, trainees often refuse to assert that old behaviors are immoral for friends who are still on the street. They often say, "People gotta do what they gotta do," or "What they do is their business." However, the old behaviors are immoral *now for themselves* because YouthBuild presents alternative opportunities that are morally superior. As one young man expresses it,

Trainee: Yeah, I got friends like that, but see, we talk on the status now. They only can come at me for some positive knowledge, you know what I'm saying. Whatever you want to do, that's your business.

Interviewer: So, do people come at you and say, we want to do X, Y, and Z, do you just ignore them, do you tell them not to come at you with that?

Trainee: No, I just be like, man, I'm chillin'. I come at them from the hood, I'm still from the hood. *I ain't never going to sell out or nothing.* We still on the

same status, you know. I just let 'em know that right now, that's the least thing on my mind.

Taking Positive Initiative Without “Selling Out”

Staff members at one site took trainees out to eat at a Chinese restaurant. One of the staff called their attention to the way that the waiters shifted back and forth between Chinese and English. Then he asked the trainees if this shifting back and forth meant that they were “selling out.” He used this as the starting point for a discussion of what it means to “sell out.”

The person who gave us this example reported that the discussion was very helpful. Trainees were able to draw upon the staff and upon one another for help in understanding that mainstream success does not require betraying or abandoning what is positive in one's base culture. Indeed, they learned that acquiring bilingual and bicultural skills can be an instrumental strategy, positioning one to serve one's home community more effectively by drawing on outside resources.

Discussions of such issues take place at all of the sites through the entire program cycle. These discussions are very important, because many trainees have friends who try to make them feel guilty for making the effort to change and stupid for believing that YouthBuild is not just one more dead end.

Fortunately, young men usually report that their friends become supportive when told that the social relations in YouthBuild are not disrespectful, as in many low-wage jobs, and that they are learning skills that will qualify them for higher-paying jobs. Participants seldom admit in interviews that harassment from peers makes them reconsider *their own* participation in the program. At the same time, they speculate that *other* trainees are not so strong and do allow the negative peer pressure to affect their commitment to the program.

Interviewer: I was talking to you about this before and you said maybe they're just scared of success. I honestly don't understand what's scary about success.

Trainee: I got a perfect, good example. I received a plaque for perfect attendance. And just yesterday, my brother and his friend came over, right? Okay, and then, you know, he started talking about my reward, he started dissing me, you know.

Interviewer: Like you were a goody-goody or something?

Trainee: I mean, he just started dissing me like, you know, like, like this ain't nothing, you know.

Interviewer: How did that make you feel?

Trainee: I mean, for me, it doesn't make me feel no way because, you know, I can stand on my own, you know, which a lot of these guys, you know, they not at that stage where, you know, they could just look over it, you know, and do what they want to do. I mean, a lot of them might want to, you know, go to school [YouthBuild] but, you know, they scared of what their friends going to say, you know.

I mean, for me, you know, one of the things for me is, you know, seeing the guys that were staying in the program going off to school, staying in school. . . . Yeah, coming home for their break, you know, telling me, you know, how school is and, you know, you know, it's fun and stuff like that. And the guys that got jobs, you know, that have actually, you know, stayed in their jobs, I mean stuff like that motivates me. I mean, so, it don't matter what nobody say, you know.

In still another example, from another trainee:

Interviewer: So, how did your boys react to you being in YouthBuild?

Trainee: Some of them were glad for me, that I was trying to do something. Whereas, others, they were like, "Oh man, what you doing, fucking with that pussy shit?"

Interviewer: So, they were trying to say that you're a sucker or whatever?

Trainee: Yeah, you coppin' out man. And I really didn't even care what they said, whether they liked it or not. . . . I was like, to each his own, that's all. It ain't none of your business what I do anyway.

Females report that their friends are more stubbornly unsupportive than is true for males. Moreover, because females are a small minority in the program, they have fewer friends of the same sex in the program to replace those on the outside from whom they might drift apart. The following young woman faced many challenges. Note the role of religion and moral legitimacy in the rationale for her determination to succeed.

Interviewer: What do you think makes the difference between them [old friends] and you?

Trainee: And I don't think I'm better than them or nothin. I know they be sayin that. I don't know what the difference is. . . . I used to even steal clothes out of Macy's, steal jeans and stuff like that, but I just grew out of that. And plus church is another thing that helped change me. I'm religious. Stealin is not the way to go. I won't have it before I'll steal it . . .

I don't want a "TV" life. All my friends be like, "You want a TV life," 'cause we always talk. I be like — I don't want a TV life, I just want a house, a nice car, two car garage, my daughter to come home from school and be able to bring her friends to a decent place, and — I want to cook dinner and see my daughter doin her homework and — you know?

Interviewer: Why do you think they call that a “TV” life.

Trainee: Because they so used to, because we all grew up differently. We didn’t grow up — only time we saw somethin like that was *on* TV. We didn’t see it in our own homes, so they call it “TV” life. But to me that’s reality, and that’s how I’m gonna be. That’s not “TV” life, that’s how I’m gonna be.

In this example, we can see the role that a new moral stance plays in her decision to continue to engage in the program and have a regular, legal job. Indeed, in addition to saying that she has “grown out” of stealing, she rejects the idea for religious reasons. Though it is not covered in this passage, we know from interviews that she, like others, received a great deal of support and encouragement from the YouthBuild staff in stabilizing herself on this new life trajectory.

Survivor’s Guilt

The following example shows the way that feelings of guilt associated with allegiance toward a peer group that remains on the street can motivate young people to take actions that completely sabotage their progress. The young man in the first example below was a high school graduate who matriculated to a freshman year in college but allowed survivor’s guilt to get him in trouble. He spent a year behind bars for illegal possession of stolen guns that he intended to take home for defensive use by his friends on the street. Eventually, he landed in YouthBuild. His example shows that some young people need more constructive and conventional ways of helping their friends who remain in the street life, or ways to rationalize leaving them alone. His comments below indicate that guilt remained a problem for him quite late into the YouthBuild program cycle. He had been a delegate to a national meeting in Washington, DC. The interviewer asked him, “What was that like?” He answered:

It was — I don’t know — it was alright, I guess. It’s just some of the attitudes that, you know, YouthBuild USA, like the ideas that they have is like, you know, just wacked. I mean, they look at it like everything is just so fine and dandy. . . . They act like, you know, people out on the streets, like they aren’t there, you know. As far as you know, you got boys out in the neighborhood but they want you to just pick up and you know and forget about them and do what you gotta do, which is fine but you always — you know, you grew up with them. You can’t just leave them behind.

Other youths had similar concerns for the safety and welfare of their friends. For example, the following young man was not only worried about his friends; the problem was compounded because he received no support from his mother in dealing with the transition he was attempting to make through YouthBuild:

Interviewer: What situations are still hard for you to deal with?

Trainee: To be truthful, when I go home like when I go to my mama and she still saying I will never go right. Also when I go to my mother's house and like I see about three or four of my homies and they'll say something like, "Yeah, C." 'Cause that's my nickname, C. "You know it's only four of us left man, everybody else in jail or dead. Why don't you hang with your homies, man." I'll be like, "No." I'll kick it with them for about half hour, maybe an hour, chopping up, reminiscing and then I buff. And they make me feel bad when I leave. 'Cause I'm used to be hanging twenty-four hours a day right there. Plus then I'll be like, I hope none of them get killed. 'Cause if they do I'm going to be feeling like shit that I wasn't around, shit like that. That's one of the hardest [things to deal with], man. And seeing dope-fiend homies. Homies that used to be straight, no drugs, basketball players. And now that I come back to my old route they on crack rock. That make me feel tough, man that's real.

We do not know how important a factor difficulty breaking away from friends was among young people who dropped out of the program. Most who remained in the program report that they gradually drifted away from spending time with their friends on the street because of the impracticality of hanging out at night and being ready to work at YouthBuild on time in the morning. They would say, "We're still friends, but I just don't see them much anymore." Youths who tried to be at YouthBuild during the day and on the streets at night ultimately had to make a choice:

A lot of people wasn't ready to . . . leave hangin out with the fellas, or runnin, and then thinkin they could come here and be successful. Hangin out all night and comin in here at eight o'clock in mornin, it's not gonna make it, 'cause I did it myself. . . . It didn't work for me.

The examples demonstrate that at least some trainees who have friends still on the street struggle with survivor's guilt and with the feeling that they are selling out. Since they may receive little positive social support outside the program — recall the mother in the passage above — they need support from the staff and from peers in the program in order to cope with the ramifications of the changes they are trying to make. Unfortunately, the more based in street life the trainee's recent past has been, the fewer people on the staff have the skills and background to establish the common ground necessary for the trainee to be open to their help. One young man, for example, asserted, "Without that [experience] you can't tell me jack shit." People with similar experiences simply have more credibility. Findings from the statistical analysis in a companion paper show that the likelihood of completing the program was lower for youths whose time was spent in the street life during the months immediately preceding the program.¹³ The material above helps to explain why.

¹³Ferguson and Clay (1996).

Young people who positively resolve the struggles detailed above find it easier to concentrate on setting goals and to begin pursuing those goals in earnest. The staff members at YouthBuild programs have various ways of exposing students to career options that they can adopt as goals and helping them to identify options that fit their interests. Some staff members are quite effective in this regard, others are not.

The most effective staff members motivate trainees to become deeply engaged in acquiring the knowledge that their chosen goals will require. This is the subject of the next section.

Stage Four: Industry Versus Inferiority

“Industry versus inferiority” is the task that becomes salient with the fourth stage of Erikson’s life-cycle model, during the school-age years before adolescence. During this stage children become more focused on producing things instead of simply doing things. They “learn to win recognition by producing things. . . . To bring a productive situation to completion is an aim which gradually supersedes the whims and wishes of play” (Erikson 1963, p. 259). They begin in earnest to learn the tools, both physical and cognitive, whose application will be necessary for success in adult roles. Failures in this process may produce feelings of inferiority. This may lead to pessimism regarding the ability to acquire particular skills. The inclination to imitate and identify with adults whose roles require those skills may be discouraged. Hence, success during this stage requires a progression of developmentally appropriate learning experiences that lead gradually toward mastery, and social supports that provide reassurances against feelings of inferiority and discouragement.

For YouthBuild, this stage of “industry versus inferiority” is the period when trainees become “industriously” involved in the quest to learn and master skills. Ideally, it is a period of deep instrumental engagement, as defined above. Gradually, young people become more sure of themselves and begin to use their new skills more independently, including outside of the program. The downside at this stage is that efforts will sometimes fail and that failure may provoke feelings of inferiority and pessimism. Supportive peers and trusted advisers at this stage are very important to help correct mistakes and to provide reassurances that the participant has the ability to achieve the mastery that he or she seeks.

Same Activities but Greater Focus

The basic counseling and instructional activities of the program have been going on for several months by the time a large percentage of trainees reach this phase of their development in the program. Staff members do not suddenly change what they have been doing and saying, but trainees respond with more urgency, interest, and excitement than during the earlier months.

If the staff has guided them successfully through the developmental tasks addressed above, students now have well-defined goals for themselves in the program. Students at this stage ask questions seriously because they *need* the answers: Exactly how long before I can take the GED test? How much does college cost? What would I need to do to qualify for college? If I want a job in construction after YouthBuild, how can I get one? Will I know enough? Do you think I could go into an apprenticeship? How much should I charge my neighbor to fix her porch? Conversely, trainees for whom tasks from prior stages are unresolved may remain ambivalent and uncommitted. If they stay in the program, they will tend not to engage industriously toward any particular outcome. Of course, it is conceivable that a trainee might reach industry in one aspect of the program and not in another. However, the following trainee, speaking in the final months of the program, sees a clear distinction between those who have reached the stage of industry and those who have not:

The same guys that mess around in the classroom mess around on the construction site. The guys that really want to work actually get down there and work.

As might be expected, more trainees become industrious as the end of the program approaches. They worry that they will not have time to complete what they have set out to achieve. As long as success seems possible, the fact that time is short is a reason to become more focused:

But in a way it is kind of hard [to resist distractions] but right now I don't even let that bother me 'cause I know it's getting too close. This program is almost over in September so I know I got to buckle down. So, all that hanging and indulging I just cut it off.

Another explains:

It's like a man going through a party, and it's crowded with people, and you're trying to get to the other side. But on the way, it's like people offering you, "Here, take a little bit of this, take a little bit of that." And you're trying to stay on track, and tryin to get over there. You know, you might stop and say, "Well, I'll take a little bit of this, I'll take a little bit of that," but then you're off track. You might not never get there. But if you stay focused, and do what you gotta do, and go through the, you know, you want it, but you just gotta say, "Damn, I gotta get over there. I gotta get what I gotta get." And just directing all your energies.

Goals Need to Be Attractive and Feasible

A requirement for young people to remain industrious toward particular goals is that the goals must seem both attractive and feasible. Earlier in the paper we introduced the idea that human behavior can be traced to basic human motives or needs. The motives we listed were achievement, influence, affiliation, and security. All are relevant here. For example, *affiliation*

comes when participants share the joy of *achievement* with staff members and peers in the program and with family members at home. *Influence* is a payoff to be expected from accumulating knowledge sufficient to become a tutor for other students, an assistant to a relative on a home repair project, or a lobbyist for the YouthBuild program in Washington, DC. The internal satisfaction of *achievement* is a payoff when students master new understandings or complete projects. Finally, a sense of *security* about the future grows as youths become more confident of their ability to find employment using their new skills and to negotiate more successfully through everyday life. Hence, most fundamentally, the potential to experience achievement, affiliation, influence, and security are keys in determining what goals and what activities young people will find attractive.

In YouthBuild, sustained belief in the feasibility of goals often requires that staff members be available and responsive to teach required skills and strategies. If the staff fulfills these conditions, then students may set goals in association with any or all components of the program. A student's goal for the education component may be to earn the GED certificate. His goal for the counseling component may be to work through unresolved personal problems. His goal for the construction component may be to learn enough to be a competent handyman around the house or to hire himself out for small carpentry jobs. For the leadership component, his goal may be to become comfortable speaking in front of groups or leading meetings. These are only some of the goals that students often decide to pursue.

Young people become less motivated and less likely to remain industrious if the effort seems unlikely to produce desired rewards. Explanations for such outcomes may focus on internal or external causes. External causes might include inadequacies in staff members' teaching practices or financial constraints that limit the availability of necessary teaching materials. "Attributional" theories of motivation distinguish between causes of success and failure that are perceived as internal or external, and as controllable or uncontrollable.¹⁴ No matter whether they are internally or externally located, if causes for particular outcomes are perceived as determined by factors that are uncontrollable, industriousness toward producing those outcomes is discouraged. When a young man feels that an initial failure was his own fault and due to factors he can control, then he may become ever more determined to succeed and to try again. Conversely, feelings of inferiority, the nominal downside of "industry versus inferiority," come from explanations that point to internal causes that are stable and uncontrollable. A perceived lack of native intellectual ability is the most prevalent internal and uncontrollable explanation for failure. Just as with external explanations that are uncontrollable, belief in immutable inferiority makes success seem infeasible and therefore dampens industry.

¹⁴See, for example, Garber and Seligman (1980).

According to interviews, encouragement from teachers and the experience of success in the classroom made a big difference to students who came in with feelings of intellectual inferiority. By increasing young people's estimates of their own abilities and helping them to understand that ability grows in response to effort, effective teachers broaden the scope of what youths regard as possible.¹⁵

Effective Teachers Make Goals Feasible

Instructors at YouthBuild sites are extremely sensitive to the fact that many of their students enter with feelings of intellectual inferiority. Most staff members work hard to show that every student has the ability to master what the program seeks to teach and that they are, indeed, much smarter than others have led them to believe. Almost every site in the demonstration had at least one teacher who exhibited an ability to give even the slowest students a better understanding of the material that classes covered. Often, this required that classes move a bit more slowly or that individual attention be given after class. Only a few instructors lacked the patience or the personality to foster the impression that everyone could succeed in the YouthBuild classroom and, sooner or later, earn the GED credential.

Teachers in YouthBuild whose students regard them as the most effective give a great deal of encouragement, have almost endless patience with students who are making an honest effort, give a great deal of individualized attention, communicate a joy for learning, and make concerted efforts to deliver lessons that are stimulating. However, of all these characteristics, patience is the one that students talk about most.

Students regard patience as a sign that teachers believe that they *can* learn and care whether they *do* learn. It is a sign that teachers are determined not to leave people behind, as happened so often to these students in regular schools. Trainees report that once they knew that a teacher would be patient, they were no longer afraid to ask questions. There was hope. It was easier to remain industrious in the classroom and to expect results from the effort.

While most teachers were patient with students' questions, a few responded in ways that some students say made them reluctant to ask for help. At one site, the writing teacher was praised widely for her patience and her determination not to leave anyone behind, but the math teacher inadvertently discouraged learning. About the math teacher, a trainee reports, "It's like with him, you never be right. He's always the one right and he's going to make you try to feel

¹⁵The importance of beliefs regarding the nature of ability is an important theme in Carol Dweck's research. She finds empirically that youths who regard intelligence as fixed tend to adopt performance goals, including keeping their lack of ability a secret if they believe that they are not smart. Those who believe that ability responds to effort tend to adopt mastery goals. The latter continue to exert effort even if they believe that they are not smart. See Dweck (1991); Dweck and Leggett (1988).

as stupid as you can.” The math teacher’s propensity to be self-congratulatory and condescending made this particular trainee and others whom we interviewed reluctant to ask him questions.

The percentage of students reaching the industry stage in preparation for the GED exam will tend to be greatest at sites where all of the instructors are both excellent teachers and patient enough that students feel free to seek their help one-on-one. In fact, the site-year where this was most true was one of those where participants achieved the largest number of GED certificates. No student that we interviewed accused either of this site’s teachers of being unreceptive to questions or of leaving students behind. A student says the following about the math teacher:

She’s like the best I had so far. Like with my math, . . . I’m moving right along with my math ’cause she explains it more thoroughly than a high school teacher that’ll tell you how to do it once and you have to figure out the rest yourself, you know? You might not understand and got to stay after school and [she] could sit there with you all day and help you out. You know? And before that day’s over you know what you’re doing.

Similarly, he says the following about the writing teacher:

I never had a English teacher like [him]. We go out and see things. We don’t just sit in class all the time and do regular English work. We go out, like museums and parks and stuff like that, to see about different things and our culture and all that stuff. And then we write about it. Sometimes we get tired of writing but it’s like he’s doing it for a reason. . . . He’ll let us know if we’re doing it right or if we got misspelled or something like that or our punctuations are wrong and stuff.

Another student says:

You know, he spends time. He tries to make what he’s teaching simple enough for you to understand. He don’t try to use all that jargon and big words, you know you’re scratching your head all the time and this stuff. He really wants you to learn what’s going on, especially about your culture.

These representative passages show some of what it takes for students in YouthBuild to begin believing that achieving the GED credential is a feasible goal. One student at this site describes how the fear of asking for help goes away:

No, I wasn’t used to asking for help. By all means I wasn’t. . . . When I first came here I really didn’t want to be like, “How do I do this?” Or, “How do I do that?” It just gradually came to me when people help you, you know? You overcome those boundaries. You know? I didn’t feel so secluded anymore. You know? I didn’t feel intimidated or stupid to ask somebody how to do a problem.

Patience combined with encouragement signals to students that the teacher believes that they can do the work. When the teacher is patient with *everyone* the message is that *everyone* can do it. The class becomes a team. The more strongly students trust that teachers

will see them and their classmates through, the more industriously engaged they become both as individuals and as a “family”:

He keeps pushing us. They don't let you give up here. Not in YouthBuild, and I feel like that's good. Because if people don't want to try, they going to make you try. And you're not going to regret it. That's the positive thing about YouthBuild, they won't let you give up. They will not let you do it. And I like that.

A similar statement comes from a student at another site:

Trainee: Because he'll push you, push you, push you to strive for that G.E.D.

Interviewer: You know sometimes people push people that just want to be left alone.

Trainee: He don't push you like that. He push you to make you want it. . . . Like it's how some people sit back in the class and they were like, he'll call you to the board to do some problems on the board, like in regular school, people wouldn't want to go up there.

He'll tell you [that] you have to go up there. And that'd break the ice of you being, you know, serious about going up to the boards and stuff in front of classes.

. . . you start getting used to it, then you start just blending in and you want to get your G.E.D. because you start realizing how important that is and you can't really do nothing without it.

The GED classroom is only one component of the YouthBuild program. The issues addressed above in the context of GED preparation appear again only slightly changed in the context of construction skills training, leadership training, and counseling.¹⁶ In each component, the characteristics of adult-youth relationships that make for hopefulness and successful learning are the same: Youths need to have clear goals and to feel that those goals are both attractive and, with the staff's support, feasible. When these conditions are sustained, young people tend to be more industrious and more able to overcome feelings of helplessness and inferiority. In addition, the mutual support that students give to one another and the evidence of success that they represent to one another are important dimensions of what motivates and sustains industriousness.

¹⁶There is not enough space in the present paper to include text on the other components. A longer version of this paper includes discussion of the industry versus inferiority stage for construction, counseling, and leadership. It is available from the author.

Stage Five: Identity Versus Identity Confusion

The fifth stage of Erikson’s life-cycle model, “identity versus identity confusion,” is the last that this presentation will address.¹⁷ Settling on an “identity” is the salient task during adolescence. Before adolescence, children have a sense of themselves, but not a resolved identity. Adolescence is the period between childhood and adulthood. Rapid changes in physical development and quickly changing expectations and responses from the external environment call into question all of the resolutions of earlier tasks. Earlier tasks are revisited in order to achieve a new synthesis. However, the “integration” that takes place during adolescence is not simply backward looking. Instead, the development of “identity” during this stage involves crafting a multi-dimensional image of self that includes race and ethnicity and career and sexual roles and that, ideally, is reflected back — validated and approved — in the words and deeds of friends and associates.

In YouthBuild, resolving “identity versus identity confusion” is the task that becomes most salient near the end of a young person’s participation in the program. See the final row of Figure 2. Identity comprises the “internalized self,” the “persona,” and the “reputation.” The internalized self is all of the beliefs that people have about themselves. The persona is the “performance” through which people define themselves to the world. It influences the reputation. The reputation is identity from the perspective of others. In each of these ways, the successful participant is not the same person who entered the program almost a year earlier. With new skills, new friends, and new understandings, the trainee faces a new set of opportunities because of what the program has helped him or her to accomplish.

Consider the following list of self-descriptions. I am competent; morally upright; someone whom people respect; a good citizen; and a positive “work in progress.” More for some YouthBuild participants than for others, these statements are more accurate descriptions of the internalized self, the persona, and the reputation when they reach the end of the program than they were when they began. Positive experiences during the program support proclivities to be *trustful*, to feel appropriately *autonomous*, to take *initiative* toward new goals, and to become *industrious* in their pursuit. If these tendencies are out of line with past inclinations, then it is likely that young people will experience a change not only in their identities but also in the direction of their lives. The stability of these changes will depend on how firmly they have

¹⁷Erikson’s model has three additional stages, but we do not consider them here. The three additional stages are intimacy versus isolation (late adolescence and early adulthood); generativity versus stagnation (middle adulthood); and integrity versus despair (middle to late adulthood). One might say that young people have achieved intimacy if they develop stable friendships among other trainees and the program staff. They have achieved generativity if near the end of the program they develop a concern for leaving it in good condition for the next cohort of trainees who will follow them. They feel a strong sense of integrity if they leave the program feeling that they have done their best and can look back with pride.

been established and how consistently the social environment supports them once the youths leave YouthBuild.

I Am Good. I Am Effective.

Seventy-eight of our one-on-one interviews with trainees took place in the final month of their participation in the program. We ended each interview with the following question: “If someone asked you to describe yourself, to say who you are, what would you say?” Coding and tabulating the answers from all five demonstration sites produces the following breakdown:

Helpful/caring/loving/I can give advice	37%
Intelligent/trying to learn/hard-working	33%
Nice/friendly/easy to get along with	29%
Honest/direct/sincere	23%
Trying to make something of myself/determined	21%
That’s a very hard and/or interesting question.	13%
Fun/carefree/easygoing/like to party	12%
Faith in God	4%
Down-to-earth	4%
Social dexterity/I can fit in	3%
Other	4%

N=78 respondents; 110 responses; some fit two categories.
(Percentages are responses as percent of respondents.)

This was an open-ended question. The answers were almost totally devoid of references to particular skills or career aspirations. Instead, the emphasis was twofold: Trainees felt a sense of control or efficacy and a feeling of moral legitimacy or goodness. These were the two core themes.

In roughly one-third of these interviews we followed up by asking what the answer to the same question would have been a year earlier. In some cases, youths said that they were headed in the same direction as their identity statement indicated, but they simply were not as far along. However, in two-thirds of the cases where we asked the follow-up question, the answer for a year earlier was distinctly different. The following are abbreviated “now” and “before” statements for eight representative trainees from among those who reported a change. Each of the five sites is represented by at least one of these examples.

Trainee 1

NOW: I know where I want to go, what I want to do. I got a heart now, patience. You can come to me for help, advice, or for anything, I’m willing to listen to you, good or bad, and be able to give you advice on it.

BEFORE: I probably would tell you I couldn't give that answer because I would probably be like, "Right now, the way I feel I don't care a fuck about nobody but me. What happens to you I don't give a fuck." Not care. I couldn't help you . . . without helping myself.

Trainee 2

NOW: I'm ready, that is who I am. Now I know, I'm focused.

BEFORE: I wouldn't be able to tell you anything, to tell you the truth.

Trainee 3

NOW: I am consistent, ambitious, curious, trying to learn more, hard working.

BEFORE: I was angry, rebellious, consistent in a negative way, still ambitious though, still knew what he wanted to do just didn't have a chance to do it. A hard-head.

Trainee 4

NOW: I achieve what I want to achieve. Very stubborn. . . . I usually try and contribute something to the conversation. . . . Very conservative, I give 110 percent to what I want to do. . . . I tell them, "Nah, I don't think that's right." I might persuade them not to do that.

BEFORE: Before I came to the program I was like a leaf, I would blow. I would go where the wind would blow me, but something in my head was saying, "No, Don, you really don't want to do that."¹⁸ But because the majority want to go, "Oh, alright. Well, okay. Cool."

Trainee 5

NOW: I'm a role model to people now. . . . I ain't selling drugs no more. I go to church, sing in the choir. We talked to the young people, . . . they started to realize that ain't the way to go, . . . I was a friend to a few of the people that are in the program, but now I got more friends, everybody's my friend, I like everybody, . . . I'm just a nice guy.

BEFORE: People looked at me like I was a dope dealer. I used to sell dope ever since I was 15 years old, but I knew I had to change 'cause I didn't want to see that penitentiary. It was a few people here I was a friend with, but right now, I got more friends now.

Trainee 6

NOW: I am a person who has changed his way of thinking and his attitude in the last nine months, keeping in touch of what he has to do but not forgetting where he came from and not forgetting to help those who need the help so they can get what I got. There's more for me to conquer out here. YouthBuild's just this small step in this big world of steps.

BEFORE: I would have said, [name] is a sort of confused Hispanic brother who's struggling right now with the system and not knowing what he really want to do. He doesn't think he's educated. Doesn't have the self-esteem to look past

¹⁸The name has been changed here. Don is not the young man's real name.

today. And just needs some guidance and some help to get him where he wants to go. I wanted to be an electrician, I still want to be an electrician.

Trainee 7

NOW: I'm shy. But I'm coming out of my shyness, . . . I can't even drink no wine or alcohol, nothing like that, it's a long process. . . . Don't get down on myself and keep up my faith in myself, just believe that I am somebody. Being clean and sober, that's powerful enough for me, that's really powerful stuff. I try not to get too confident.

BEFORE: I didn't want to ask nobody for nothing, especially help for a problem I was having, hell no. Before this, something I couldn't do like in school, I wouldn't tell nobody, man. I either don't do it or keep trying but I wouldn't go ask for no help . . . I didn't think I was an addict or nothing like that, which I am. I consider myself an alcoholic . . .

Trainee 8

NOW: I'm intelligent, outgoing, easy to get along with.

BEFORE: Hard to get along with. An attitude problem. But I wanted something better for me and my son, I don't want him coming up like that, in that environment that I came up in and doing the stuff that I did.

These “before” profiles report anger, drug dealing, lack of control, and feelings of inferiority. Many youths whose profiles from before the program would be similar to those listed above dropped out or were asked to leave before the end of the program cycle. Hence, these changes are not inevitable. Nevertheless, changes in trustfulness, autonomy, initiative, and industriousness — the first four tasks in the Erikson framework — are clearly apparent for these young people.

As the tabulations show, regardless of whether they completed their GED exams or received any particular certificate for the achievement of new skills, the participants in our interviews report that they are both more efficacious and more morally upright than they were a year earlier. Unfortunately, we do not know how sustainable these gains are after the program ends. The answer depends on what happens in other settings, such as the new workplace. In each new context, young people must negotiate social relations through a progression of tasks analogous to those that this paper has addressed for YouthBuild.¹⁹

¹⁹Prior research paints a bleak picture regarding what is likely to happen to young men after they leave YouthBuild. Even though they have changed, challenges await them. Stereotypes of young black males pose significant barriers to respectful treatment and employment opportunity. On the negative messages that young black males receive, see Ferguson and Jackson (1994). On employers' stereotypes of young black and Hispanic males in Chicago, see Kirschenman and Neckerman (1991). For an overview of earnings and employment trends for black males and associated explanations, see Ferguson (1995).

I Am Who I Expect to Become

Again, the identity statements tabulated above seldom mentioned specific skills, career aspirations, or achievements such as the GED certificate. Nevertheless, skills and achievements clearly affect the sense of optimism that trainees have at the end of the program, and expectations regarding future careers are clearly aspects of their identities. Most trainees interviewed in the final weeks of the program cycle were able to articulate an image of who they expected to become. For example,

Trainee 1: Basically, me I'm looking forward to just being a carpenter, man. Establishing myself to a certain position to where I've made a lot of money and I've got a lot of money in the bank. What I'm going to do, I'm going to fix up a house man, and when I'm not working I can do that shit myself. And if push come to shove I can always sell that house.

Trainee 2: [I'll pay my dues working outside first, but] I don't see myself outside [for a career]. I want to work in someone's office, probably giving contracts and so forth for whatever the company is that I work for. That's what I want to do. . . . I don't want to work outside. I want to be inside with the heat and other people. . . . Be someone's estimator or something at some construction company.

Trainee 3: I wasn't even planning on going to college, you know, just get my GED, learn some construction, get a job. . . . I scored high on my GED so they said, "Well, you can go to college if you want." And they're hooking me up now, we're sending out applications right now.

Each of these young people has a reasonably clear and positive mental image of the future. Programs in three of the five cities did a much better job than the other two in helping students to formulate plans for life after YouthBuild. The weaker two sites produced students whose plans lacked specificity even when they felt generally that YouthBuild was a positive experience.

Also, sites differed in their success at placing students in jobs. Explanations given for the differences included differences in local economic conditions, in the job readiness of trainees, and in the availability of staff resources to do job placement. Whatever the relative importance of these and other factors, students clearly felt let down at sites where placement rates were low.²⁰

²⁰Ferguson and Clay (1996) provides evidence that job placements affected trainees' judgments about whether the program lived up to its promises. Job placements also affected relationships with parents, particularly fathers. Youths who got jobs at the end of the program were statistically significantly more likely to report that their fathers respected them more because of their participation in YouthBuild.

What the GED Means for Identity

Many trainees do not complete the GED exam before the program ends. In only two of ten site-years in the demonstration were GED credentials achieved by the end of the program by half or more of the high school dropouts who received positive terminations.²¹ Failing to complete the process can be discouraging. The following young man attended the weakest site in the demonstration project and almost certainly did not receive proper counseling:

Trainee: Things didn't work out the way you planned it, you start getting disappointed. It's towards the end of the year, you're right back where you started from.

Interviewer: Before, when you came into the program, where did you hope you'd be right now?

Trainee: Right now, on this day? I knew it was going to take some time. I hoped within four or five months I'd have my GED, though, and start on a job within four to six months.

It's not exactly all their fault either. Personally I knew, it's people like me, I came here with no credits at all. I didn't really go to high school. . . . I have no other options but the GED.

Are my skills sharp enough to pass the test? Well, right now, honestly, no, I don't expect to pass it right off the bat, no I don't. What I plan on doing though is taking it and seeing where I really need to work on it, sharpen my skills in that area, then take it. And I don't expect to pass it the first time I take it. I already know it, I don't expect to. I would like to, but I don't expect that. And there's a lot of stuff I don't know. Like I said, I only went as far as the ninth grade.

While he tries to be positive, he is not very optimistic. His hopes had been high, but now he feels that he is "right back where you started from." The fact that he feels this way does not reflect well on the counseling and instruction that he received at this particular site.

This site did little or no admissions screening for preparedness and was in relative disarray for a substantial period during the program cycle. Moreover, this is the one YouthBuild site that awards mostly high school degrees. Since the high school degree would have required several more years for him and his site was not focused on the GED, one might ask whether he should have been admitted at all. Ideally, he should find his way to additional assistance with GED preparation, but there is no evidence in the interview that he has been counseled to do so.

²¹The phrase "positive termination" simply means that the trainee was not expelled from the program. Most youths with positive terminations lasted through the entire program cycle; some left early to enter school or work.

Among participants at other sites who stayed through the program cycle but left without the GED certificate, most had received a substantial amount of GED preparation. Many had passed some but not all of the subtests, and most with whom we spoke seemed more optimistic than the young man above about their ability to eventually earn the certificate. The following young man was nearing the end of the program cycle, but expected that he would complete the GED exam eventually:

Like me, I wasn't never really dumb. To tell you the truth, I should have been way through my GED test, I'm mad at myself that I didn't. I was scared 'cause I thought it was going to be hard as hell. That's real. But now, every individual that come through the program, they're strong. And, if they come to school, they're going to learn 'cause of the teachers.

Our project was not equipped to track participants to see how many actually completed the GED process after the program ended. We would expect mixed results. Without special arrangements, YouthBuild programs cannot offer sustained instruction and social support to outgoing cohorts as they bring in new trainees. If the promise of GED credentials is to be real for the majority, then either the first year of GED instruction needs to produce them more rapidly, or organized support during a second year needs to be provided.

When YouthBuild participants achieve the GED credential, it represents a major milestone in their lives. It affects the internalized self, the persona, and the reputation. Many regard earning the GED certificate to be the first conventional goal that they have ever achieved as the result of sustained effort. It shows that effort pays. Often, it proves to them that they are smarter than they thought they were. In addition, no matter what the reasons were that they dropped out of school, they now have closure on their secondary education. It feels good:

They make assertions you can get your GED, so you can actually say you have a high school diploma. That feels good. To tell you the truth, I think that would motivate any young dope dealer now, if they could actually go to school and get their GED and say they've accomplished something. Something's been accomplished, man. I haven't accomplished nothing in my life, that's the first thing I've ever accomplished in my life, is my GED, man. And it took me twenty-one years to get it. Three years extra. So I feel fucking good. I ain't never givin this shit up for nothing in my life. I ain't never felt like this!

Another says:

When I finally got it me and my mom cried together. Yeah, 'cause she knew how much I'd been working on it. . . . It was my first time taking it. . . . I didn't go to take the test intimidated. When I went to take the test I felt good about myself. I felt good about what I learned and what I know. And I owe a lot of that to the teachers at YouthBuild. [Question: Do you think you did anything different when you were in YouthBuild than you did in public schools?] I know I did

something different. 'Cause it felt different. I felt different. I was more anxious to learn. But I've always been anxious to learn. It's just no one has been willing to give me the amount of knowledge that YouthBuild gave me so I put extra energy into it.

Still another says:

My getting my G.E.D. is my most important memory. That means a lot to me. I'm glad I finally got it. [Question: Why do you think your mom cried when you got it?] 'Cause she didn't have a chance to get hers. She didn't have a chance to graduate from high school and neither did any of my family besides me and my other cousin. She got her diploma. I got my G.E.D. So, it was good. You know she cried for me 'cause I was her first kid to get a G.E.D. Memorable for me because I had fun preparing for it.

Once students have their GED certificates, they can look ahead with greater anticipation:

Okay, before the program I felt, to tell you the truth, I was living in [an] imaginary world. 'Cause I wasn't actually setting out to do it. I was just saying, "Okay, this is what I'm going to do. This is what I'm going to do. This is what I'm going to do." But without a GED I couldn't even do the first thing and that was go to school. Now that I have my GED, now I'm actually in the process.

Conclusion

Young people on negative paths because of bad experiences during the early years of life may arrive at YouthBuild plagued by feelings of mistrust, shame and doubt, guilt and inferiority. Others may have more positive feelings but still need assistance because they have few skills and social supports that are of value in mainstream institutions. What participants have in common is that they need assistance making healthy and hopeful transitions from adolescence into early adulthood.

The most successful sites of the YouthBuild program strive to select youths who, whatever their histories, are truly ready to put their lives on the right track. These sites hire staff members whose primary mission is to reclaim young people from the margins of mainstream society and move them toward the center. Ideally, the program then guides youths through a series of developmental tasks to cultivate competencies and orientations that will improve the quality of their lives and enhance their potential contributions to society. When they succeed, young people leave the program with healthier identities — more positive internalized selves, more conventionally mature personas, and gradually improving reputations among family and friends.

Our program-cycle version of Erikson's life-cycle model provides a rich conceptual structure through which to understand the tasks and stages of engagement and identity devel-

opment in the YouthBuild program. Young people arrive at YouthBuild uncertain that they can trust the program to be any better than the schools and other programs that, they believe, have already failed them. Those who experience the most success in YouthBuild learn to trust the staff, to respect the rules, and to select practical goals for achievement. Sometimes, fully engaging the program requires overcoming feelings of survivor's guilt and social isolation from un-supportive friends. Ideally, once feelings of ambivalence wane and goals become clear, youths work industriously toward the goals that they have selected. Finally, they consolidate a positive and healthy sense of themselves that is the foundation of a new hopefulness about the future. This is the ideal picture. Sometimes it comes true.

Young people who experience more difficulty stumble on many types of obstacles: un-supportive home and community environments, inappropriate actions by the program staff, or their own lack of readiness. The lack of readiness typically means that they have not decided with resolve that they want to change. Often, they may be too attached to their current lifestyle, too unsure of themselves, or too skeptical that YouthBuild is "for real." This skepticism is not irrational. Past experiences with public schools and in other programs that have failed to deliver what they promised have taught youths to be mistrustful and pessimistic.

Nevertheless, when young people are ready to change and the YouthBuild model is implemented well, it appears to have the components and qualities that they need to point their lives in a positive direction. Counselors are available to help solve problems and to assist in the development of good judgment; the leadership component emphasizes personal responsibility and gives youths a voice in program governance; a climate of mutual respect between students and staff prevails; instruction is offered to equip young people with basic skills and employability training that the marketplace will value; and placement in a job or help with college applications is available to those who complete the program.

In the sites that we studied, the quality of implementation ranged from quite high to poor. However, nothing about the YouthBuild model is so difficult or so mysterious that implementation at a high standard of quality should not become the norm.²² YouthBuild USA has a vital role to play as an intermediary and technical assistance agent in making high quality the standard. Through the demonstration project upon which this paper reports and through other efforts, YouthBuild USA is assembling a knowledge base that can help sites across the nation to emulate what others have found effective and to avoid proven mistakes. As YouthBuild organizations grow in proficiency, greater should be the number of young men and women who, upon completion of the program, can echo the following:

²²This assumes that salaries are sufficient to prevent excessive staff turnover. Turnover was an important problem at only one of the sites we studied.

Well, my family thinks it's a great idea. They think it's something real positive that I've done for myself and for the community. I think it's something that has taught them that I could do the right thing. For once in my life I finished something that I started. I'm reaching a lot of new goals. And, when my mother found out I was going to college she started crying. Because I was out there. I was gone. When I was out in the streets I was gone. I was deep in there. I was either going to jail, kill somebody or kill myself. And you know I didn't care about no one. I didn't care about nobody, not even my mother. I used to steal from her, man. I used to do a lot of crazy shit. And for me to change my life the way I have is something really significant to her. And she looks at me now and she knows I'm responsible. She knows she can depend on me.

For this young man, YouthBuild provided a moratorium in the same way that Erikson describes adolescence as providing a moratorium for young people in general. For Erikson, the psychosocial moratorium provided by adolescence allows time to prepare for adulthood.

A moratorium is a period of delay, granted to somebody who is not ready to meet an obligation or forced upon somebody who should give himself time to do so. Here I mean a delay of adult commitments, and yet not only a delay. I mean a period that is characterized by a selective permissiveness on the part of society and of provocative playfulness on the part of youth; and yet also a period of deep (if often transitory) commitment on the part of youth and ceremonial acceptance of commitment on the part of society.²³

Programs such as YouthBuild play a similar role for their participants, who, at the outset of the program, are not prepared to participate in conventional society as adults. If all goes well as they go through the program, they develop new understandings of themselves and their environments, resolve issues that have undermined their ability to assume adult responsibilities, and leave the programs having integrated these changes into new identities that enable them to play positive and productive roles in their communities.

²³Quoted in Maier (1965), p. 58.

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**Transforming Youth from the Inside Out
Program Directors' Views of YouthBuild's Potential (2014)**

**Farhana Hossain
Michelle S. Manno**

As documented by Ferguson and Snipes in the preceding pages, many participants at the YouthBuild replication sites in the early 1990s viewed themselves in a more positive light toward the end of their participation in the program. Whether they achieved an academic or occupational certification or not, these young adults spoke of deep personal transformations that were tied not only to their own identity, but often to their friends, family, and community. More than twenty years later, a nationwide survey of YouthBuild program directors finds that the themes that Ferguson and Snipes set forth around identity and transformation of young adults in YouthBuild continue to ring true today. When asked about their observations on youth development in the program, today's YouthBuild directors echoed the sentiments of participants and staff at the demonstration sites — not just on the changes that a young adult may undergo in YouthBuild, but also on the internal and external factors that affect the transformation process.

Data for this renewed effort to understand YouthBuild's influence on youth development — beyond the traditional academic and employment outcomes that the program aspires to achieve — were collected through two means: an online survey of program directors across the country, followed by semistructured telephone interviews with a smaller group of respondents. Nearly 180 programs in the YouthBuild Affiliated Network were invited to participate in the online survey, and about 60 percent — 108 programs — responded.¹ The survey asked program directors to share their observations on changes in both self-perception and behavior among YouthBuild participants. The geographic and organizational characteristics of the response sample were generally representative of the full sample of programs that received the surveys.² Table 1 details these respondent characteristics, along with a snapshot of the programs' leadership and community service offerings.

¹MDRC requested that only one management staff member in each program — preferably the program director or manager — complete the survey. In a very small number of cases, leadership staff members other than the director or the manager of the program filled out the survey, for example, executive directors of agencies that sponsor the program. Throughout the rest of this section, “program directors” refers to all respondents.

²While there is no universally accepted standard for a good survey response rate among social science researchers — other than higher is better — a 60 percent response rate for a survey is considered healthy (especially for an email survey) and adequate for analysis and reporting. It is the threshold used by some government agencies, as well as many academic journals, to determine eligibility for publication. Whenever the response rate is lower than 100 percent, there is risk of nonresponse bias. However, there were no systematic differences between the YouthBuild programs that responded to the MDRC survey and those that did not. See Gail Johnson, *Research Methods for Public Administrators*, 3rd ed. (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2014); Allen Rubin and Earl Babbie, *Essential Research Methods for Social Work*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole, 2009); Colleen Cook, Fred Heath, and Russel L. Thompson, “A Meta-Analysis of Response Rates in Web- or Internet-Based Surveys,” *Educational and Psychological Measurement* 60, no. 6 (2000): 821-836.

YouthBuild (2014)

Table 1

Characteristics of YouthBuild Programs

Characteristic	Percentage of Programs	Sample Size
Program type		108
Local/regional nonprofit	67.6	
National nonprofit	11.1	
Public agency	10.2	
Independently operated YouthBuild	6.5	
Community college or school district	4.6	
YouthBuild affiliation status ^a		108
Accredited affiliate	17.6	
Full affiliate	49.1	
Provisional affiliate	33.3	
Geographic category ^b		108
Large metro, central	34.3	
Large metro, fringe	18.5	
Medium metro	19.4	
Small metro	12.0	
Rural	15.7	
Years of operation		106
0-5	34.9	
5-10	21.7	
10-15	17.9	
15 or more	25.5	
Respondent total tenure with YouthBuild (years)		99
0-5	44.4	
5-10	31.3	
10-15	13.1	
15 or more	11.1	

(continued)

The in-depth follow-up interviews aimed to better understand the process of transformation that an average YouthBuild participant may experience and the factors that may help or hinder it. Sixteen YouthBuild directors — randomly chosen from survey respondents who had been in a leadership position at YouthBuild for five years or longer — participated in these interviews.

Table 1 (continued)

Characteristic	Percentage of Programs	Sample Size
Require community service in addition to building affordable housing	98.1	107
Frequency of community service opportunities		108
Two to three times per month	33.3	
At least once a week	31.5	
At least once a month	19.4	
Less often than monthly	6.5	
Varies widely	9.3	
Offer leadership classes		107
In combination with other training	73.8	
Stand-alone classes	26.2	

SOURCE: Program director responses to YouthBuild Youth Development Web Survey.

NOTES: ^aOnly programs in the YouthBuild USA Affiliated Network were invited to participate in the survey. Affiliation status takes into account a program's level of maturity and adherence to YouthBuild USA program and performance standards. Accredited programs have the highest level of affiliation and are the most well-established, followed by full and provisional members.

^bGeographic categories are based on the National Center for Health Statistics scheme, which categorizes counties under six codes: 1 (large metro, central), 2 (large metro, fringe), 3 (medium metro), 4 (small metro), 5 (micropolitan), and 6 (noncore). For this table, micropolitan and noncore were combined to create the rural category.

Staff Observations on Youth Transformation

Results from the program director survey, as well as the interviews, suggest that many young adults who participate in YouthBuild for at least one program cycle — which typically lasts between 9 to 12 months — achieve considerable personal growth in how they view themselves and their relationships to others in society.

Changes in Self-Perception

A majority (61 percent) of the program directors said that if asked to describe themselves, most participants in a YouthBuild cohort would give a very different answer at the end of the program from the one they would give at the beginning.³ Consistent with findings from

³Of the program directors surveyed, 9 percent said that about half the participants in a cohort would give a very different answer, and about 30 percent said that a quarter or fewer would give a very different answer.

Ferguson and Snipes, young adults would say that they are lacking or deficient in many ways when they start out in YouthBuild, according to the directors. In the “before” profiles of young participants, program directors reported a lack of direction, goals, motivation, focus, and sense of hope for the future, along with involvement in illicit activities, like drugs or gangs, and “the wrong crowd.” After participation in YouthBuild, the directors said, most young people would describe themselves as confident, motivated, focused, and having some direction or goals for their future.

In the words of the directors, participants are also more likely to speak of themselves as contributors to their community toward the end of the program, corroborating the findings from a recent study of YouthBuild programs that receive funding from the Corporation for National and Community Service — also known as YouthBuild Americorps programs. That study found that participants convey a stronger sense of connection to their communities after spending some time in the programs. “These young people perceive a positive shift in personal responsibility and the way they are perceived by family and community,” the study concluded.⁴

While the survey responses largely aligned with the findings from Ferguson and Snipes, YouthBuild directors were more likely to say that participants would include their academic and employment goals and achievements in their self-descriptions after the program. When participants spoke of their identities in the demonstration interviews, their “answers were almost totally devoid of references to particular skills or career aspirations,” according to Ferguson and Snipes. The same was not true for the responses shared by program directors, a great many of whom view aspirations and achievements in education and employment to be an integral part of a participant’s identity after YouthBuild, along with a sense of efficacy and moral goodness. Readiness to contribute to one’s community was a big theme in program directors’ observations on youth transformation, and tangible achievements in education and employment are a key part of that process for them.

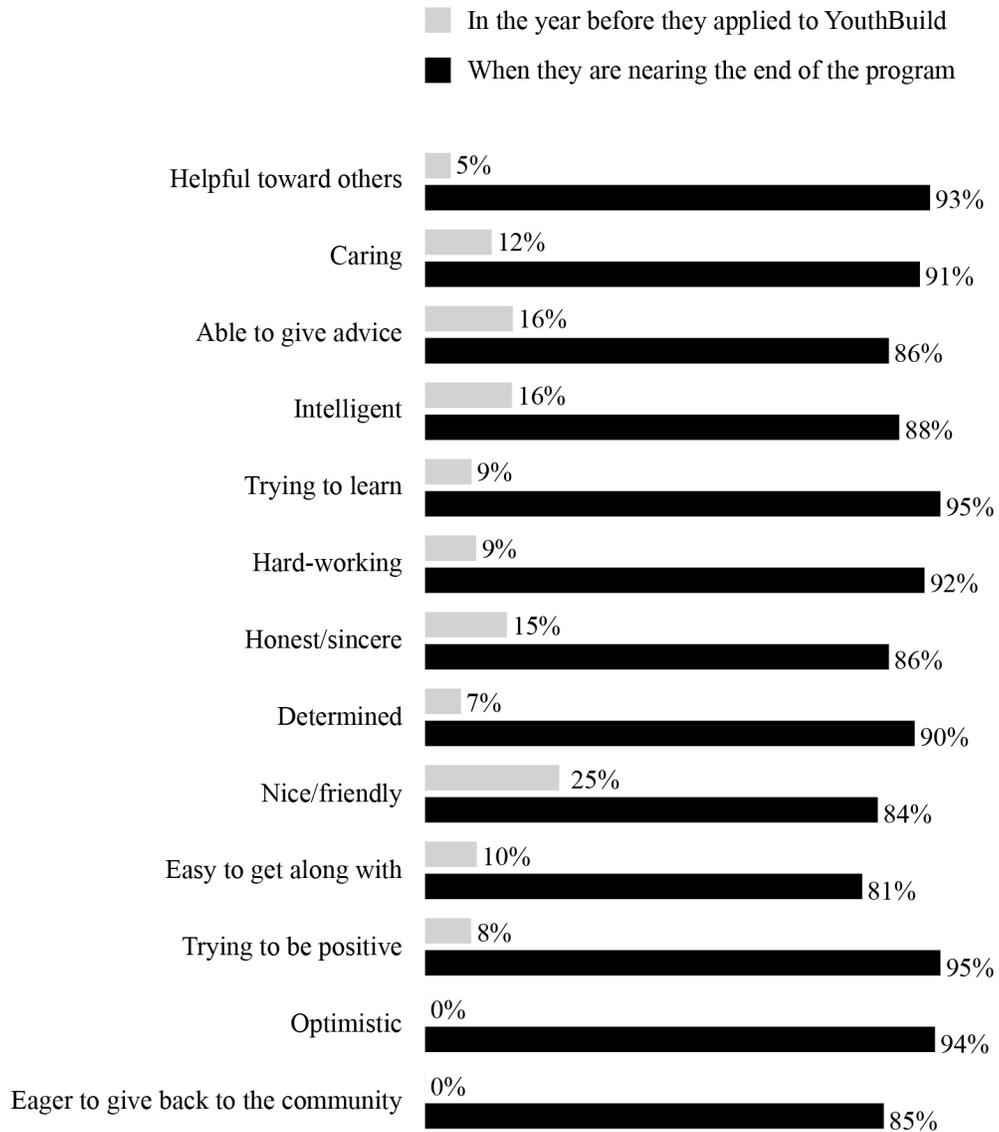
Besides open-ended questions about how YouthBuild participants view themselves over the course of the program, the survey also asked program directors about specific changes in feelings of efficacy and moral legitimacy that young people had discussed in Ferguson and Snipes. As shown in Figure 3, program directors reaffirmed that over the course of the program,

⁴The results were based on participants surveyed at 21 YouthBuild Americorps programs. While most YouthBuild programs require some community service activities in addition to building affordable housing, YouthBuild Americorps programs (numbering about 70 nationwide) have concrete requirements for community service — such as a minimum number of hours — for participants to qualify for education stipends upon program completion. See Kathleen A. Tomberg, *Youth Development Through Service: A Quality Assessment of the YouthBuild AmeriCorps Program* (New York: Research and Evaluation Center, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York, 2013).

YouthBuild (2014)

Figure 3

Percentage of Program Directors Who Said Participants Are Likely or Very Likely to Use Positive Words to Describe Themselves



SOURCE: Program director responses to YouthBuild Youth Development Web Survey.

YouthBuild participants are significantly more likely to describe themselves as optimistic, honest, sincere, determined, helpful toward others, and eager to give back to the community.

Changes in Future Outlook and Goals

While many young adults come to YouthBuild to finish high school or to get their high school equivalency certification, most participants are not able to articulate clear educational or career goals when they enter the program, according to YouthBuild directors in the survey. As Figure 4 indicates, an even smaller share of young people are able to articulate any goals or expectations related to their emotional or social identity. In contrast, nearly every staff member in the survey has seen or heard about noteworthy changes in the way participants speak about their future goals and expectations for themselves *after* participating in YouthBuild. About half the staff members surveyed said that at the end of the program, most participants would be able to talk about goals related to their emotional state or identity, to their role as parents, to their relationship with family and friends, and to their community. Fewer than 10 percent of those surveyed felt that could be said about the participants when they first started YouthBuild.

In the interviews, program directors said YouthBuild participants simply do not expect to live very long before they enter the program, and therefore do not think about setting concrete goals for their future. “Without YouthBuild, I’d be dead or in jail” was a statement often repeated by program directors when describing the outlook of their participants. YouthBuild participants, whether they finish the program or not, expect to live longer and have a more optimistic view of their future, according to program directors. Previous research suggests similar effects: A 2002-2003 survey of YouthBuild graduates, selected primarily from a subset of established programs, found that 65 percent of the nearly 900 respondents expected to live longer after participating in the program. The average difference between respondents’ expected life span before YouthBuild and after YouthBuild was 32 years.⁵

Changes in Behavior

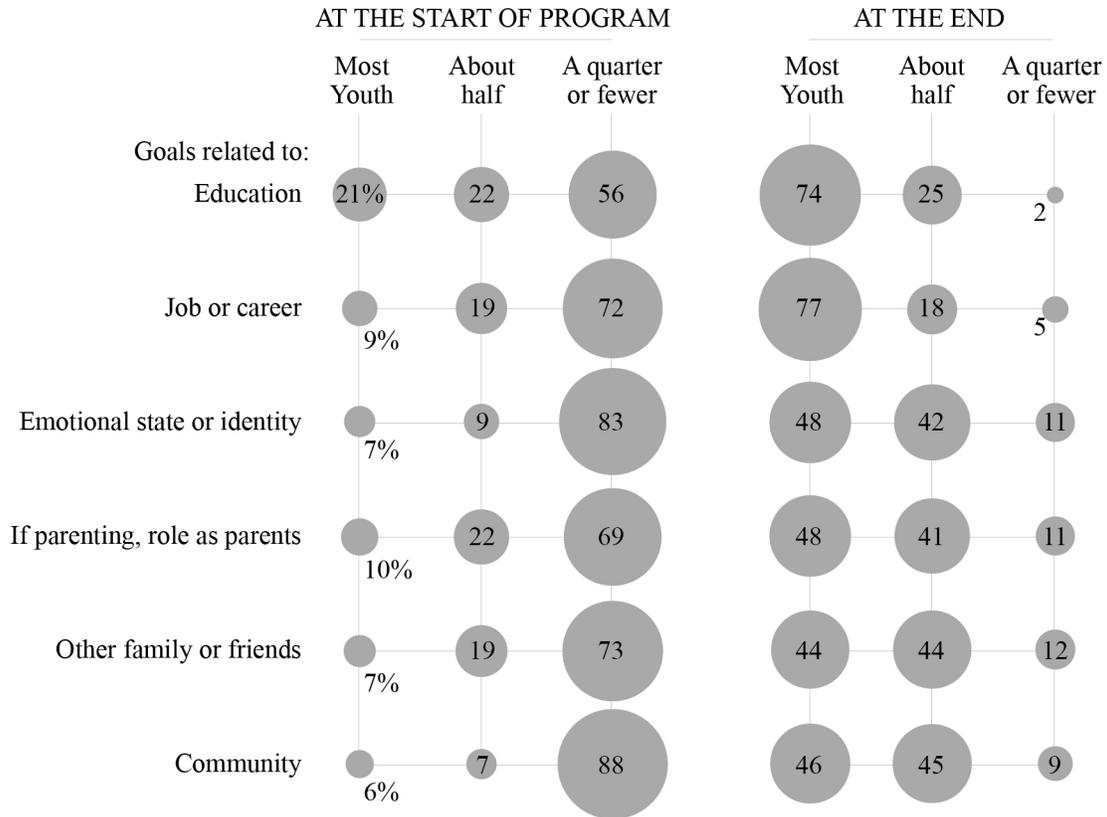
Nearly every respondent in the survey reported having seen or heard about noteworthy changes in young people’s behaviors and actions outside of the program after their participation in YouthBuild; a slightly smaller share — 86 percent — reported noteworthy changes in the types of people the participants associated with outside of the program. Program directors often mentioned changes in behavior related to anger and self-control, including substance abuse and

⁵Andrew Hahn, Thomas D. Leavitt, Erin McNamara Horvat, and James Earl Davis, *Life After YouthBuild: 900 YouthBuild Graduates Reflect on Their Lives, Dreams and Experiences* (Somerville, MA: YouthBuild USA, 2004).

YouthBuild (2014)

Figure 4

Percentage of Program Directors Who Said Participants Are Able to Articulate Clear Goals



SOURCE: Program director responses to YouthBuild Youth Development Web Survey.

NOTE: Size of circles represents the percentage of program directors who estimated the share of participants in a YouthBuild cohort that can articulate clear goals in each topic area: most, half, a quarter, or fewer than a quarter.

other illicit or criminal activities. They also reported greater engagement in education, employment, family relationships, and community service activities outside of the program.

In-depth interviews with several program directors provided greater insights into some of the changes that were reported in the survey. As in Ferguson and Snipes, the interviewees stressed that YouthBuild participants differ widely in the competencies (“assets that reside

within the person”) and social supports (“assets that reside within participant’s network of relationships”) they have upon entering the program, and the process of change can look different from one youth to another depending on these internal and external factors.

Interviewees were specifically asked about changes in behaviors related to substance abuse and interpersonal relationships, as well as views on higher education and economic self-sufficiency.

- **Substance abuse.** Most staff members reported seeing some changes in behaviors related to substance abuse among many of the participants while they were in the program, and nearly everyone attributed the changes to their program’s drug testing or harm reduction policies. Several interviewees said this was an area of struggle for their program, often because such behaviors are common among friends and families of the participants. Conversations highlighting negative consequences of substance abuse on concrete outcomes like passing the GED or getting a job were mentioned as a common strategy in attempts to change participants’ behaviors and outlook.
- **Relationships.** One area where most staff members reported significant changes among most participants was in the realm of interpersonal relationships. When asked about program goals for personal transformation, most staff members said they focused on building communication and conflict negotiation skills, which may explain the widely reported changes in the way young people engage with others. Programs also reported providing various support services to participants with children to lessen the stress of parenting, including assistance with child care and parenting classes. Multiple interviewees reported seeing relationships between YouthBuild parents and their children turn more communicative and engaged.
- **Postsecondary goals.** YouthBuild services can influence participants’ desire to pursue higher education, but program directors said that financial barriers often prevent participants from actually doing so, as many need employment immediately after they leave the program. Most programs reported offering postsecondary services for their participants, such as college tours and counseling on admissions and financial aid; program directors said that these experiences broaden participants’ awareness of pathways available to them. The level of emphasis on higher education varied greatly among the program directors who were interviewed; several underscored that advanced technical and occupational training, not only two-year or four-year college degrees, was a big part of their postsecondary focus when guiding young people.

- **Self-sufficiency and employment goals.** Financial needs were also mentioned as barriers to pursuing goals of self-sufficiency for the participants. Nearly all YouthBuild participants live in poverty, and many of their families and friends rely on public benefits, such as subsidized housing and food assistance, to make ends meet. Program directors said that they stress the concept of self-sufficiency and financial empowerment, and many provide services to improve financial literacy among participants. But participants and their families are often so “entrenched in public assistance or public housing” and “wrapped up in all the required meeting and case managers,” respondents said, that they have difficulties envisioning a different lifestyle. Program directors also said that participants do not have sufficient incentives to reduce their dependency on public assistance, as their earning potential in the current labor market would not allow them to support themselves and their families without additional assistance. Most participants qualify for and are often placed in entry-level, low-wage jobs, where they do not earn enough to meet their living needs but face the prospect of losing eligibility for public benefits due to their earnings (as seen in the Ferguson and Snipes anecdote of a young woman who could not pay rent because her YouthBuild earnings led to a decrease in the amount of public assistance she received). Pursuing work “is a financial risk for them,” a program director said.

Factors That May Affect the Process of Youth Transformation

The 2014 survey of YouthBuild program directors reaffirms the central finding of the Ferguson and Snipes paper that the program can help participants achieve personal growth and develop positive identity. In the paper, the authors caution that these changes are likely to materialize “when young people are ready to change and the YouthBuild model is implemented well.” MDRC’s in-depth interviews with a small subset of survey respondents sought to understand how today’s YouthBuild programs approach youth development and the factors that facilitate and hinder their efforts. These conversations echoed the main observations from Ferguson and Snipes about the internal competencies and social circumstances that affect young people’s experience in YouthBuild, and how different program components contribute to the broader mission of helping youths “rebuild their communities and their lives.”

Differences Among Youths and the “Readiness” Factor

As in Ferguson and Snipes, program directors stressed that while most YouthBuild participants are low-income and at risk, there is a great deal of heterogeneity among the young people who attend the program. Participants vary widely in age, academic skill level,

family and living situation, length of disconnection from school, and compounding risk factors (such as court involvement and parenthood). Where they are in their lives when they enter the program can greatly influence the pace and degree of their transformation, according to those interviewed.

Program directors frequently spoke about the multitude of barriers that YouthBuild participants face in successful engagement — entrenched poverty and marginalization, family and housing instability, lack of transportation and access to child care, inadequate public schools, and unsafe neighborhoods. Yet, reaffirming Ferguson and Snipes, a majority of the interviewees said the main difference between those who succeed in the program and those who do not is a sense of “readiness” to change. Most programs reported that they screen applicants before enrollment to identify those who appear to be motivated and ready to take their lives in a different direction.

Young adults who are deemed “ready” by the programs are not necessarily less at risk or in need of less support than those who are not accepted into the program. Several program directors said that very often these are young people who have reached such a low point that they realize that they are not going to survive without making a change in their lives. As one program director put it: “Our most successful students are the ones who hit the bottom hard and realize they never want to go back there again. Students who are coming back from prison, had near-death experiences, or someone close to them has been shot and killed. The ones that are most successful are those people.” But while such participants may be ready for change, negative views of their own abilities and a lack of positive support in their personal lives often mean that they do not know how to overcome the external barriers and achieve the change that they seek.

Program directors frequently spoke of young people who were turned away or who left the program voluntarily because they were not ready, but who came back to the program when the proverbial “lightbulb” switched on in their minds and they were ready to put in the work that the program requires of its participants. One program director spoke of a young female participant who had two children by the age of 20 and failed to get into the program on two occasions because she did not follow through on tasks during the program orientation period. When she completed the orientation process successfully during her third try, she was pregnant with her third child, and this time her actions were different. She was able to articulate the need for change in her life in order to support her three children. Despite the difficulties that came with a pregnancy, she completed the program successfully and secured a position in retail.

How the Programs Approach Youth Development

- **Nearly all YouthBuild programs reported setting explicit goals for developing young people that are beyond the academic and job-related goals of the program.**

Many of the program directors said that their programs seek to cause a “mindset change” or a “mentality shift” among their participants, but that the program cycle is not enough time to finish that work. Typically young adults are in the program for 9 to 12 months, which is enough time to “plant a seed,” but it will need to be nurtured beyond the program cycle. As one staff member put it: “It starts with a personal transformation. The fool with a million dollars won’t be productive with it, and the same thing pertains to the GED, or any type of certification.” Many respondents echoed that sentiment and reported that unless the participants changed the way they thought about themselves and about their place in their community, they might not continue down a path to success after the program, even if they reached the program’s academic and job-related goals.

Program directors recognize that the life circumstances that bring young people to YouthBuild will still be there when they leave, and they want to equip young people with the skills to deal with adversity and conflicts in a responsible way, to make better choices for themselves, and to advocate for themselves and their community. Toward that end, many staff members mentioned that they were focused on building skills in effective communication, conflict response, and leadership — skills that they felt would continue to empower participants after they left the program.

- **Program directors stressed the comprehensive nature of the YouthBuild model and said that the interaction of all of its components is important to the overall development of young adults.**

Ferguson and Snipes pinpointed how different components of YouthBuild play a role in each of the five developmental stages adapted from Erikson.⁶ For example, the leadership component of YouthBuild is important for resolving “initiative versus guilt,” as it helps participants overcome the guilt of success by “taking responsibility for making things go right” in one’s personal life, in one’s family, in the YouthBuild program, and in the community. And the academic and job skills training components are crucial to resolving feelings of inferiority and acquiring industry. Program directors who were interviewed affirmed many of these sentiments. “The five circles are linked together and that’s something we strive to consistently,” said one

⁶Erik H. Erikson, “Eight Ages of Man,” Chap. 7 in *Childhood and Society* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1963).

program director, referring to the basic components of YouthBuild — education services; job skills training; counseling and case management; leadership development and community service; and transition services for graduates.

While everyone stressed the importance of the last three program components, most said that academic and job skills training played a significant role in changing how young people view themselves and their community. Staff members feel that construction work provides young people with the experience of producing value, often for the first time in their lives, and an opportunity for them to contribute to their communities. “The purpose behind building the house is to beautify the neighborhood or [to] turn a vacant lot into affordable housing for maybe a homeless family . . . they take a lot of ownership in that,” one program director said.

Similarly, getting their GED credential or high school diploma can be a huge boost for participants’ self-confidence and self-worth (as seen in Ferguson and Snipes). One staff member said: “Many of them have not completed anything. To see the certificate in their hand has an effect on their self-esteem and sense of achievement.” But the educational component of YouthBuild can also pose a hurdle for youth development, as many participants come to the program with significant academic gaps and after having struggled in the public education system. Program directors said that the smaller class sizes and more individualized attention from teachers can help build academic confidence in the classroom and, in turn, self-confidence. According to one program director: “They’ve been labeled [in public schools], but YouthBuild allows them to build that confidence back up one step at a time. In a [traditional] school setting, you’re definitely going to have a group of people that’s going to put them down. We have a somewhat more one-on-one environment and that confidence builds up.” Another talked about how classroom instruction promotes curiosity and thus helps change their outlook on learning: “Students learn that they can learn, that it’s important to learn, and that you can never stop learning.”

As seen in Table 1, nearly all the programs in the survey require community service from all participants, in addition to building affordable housing, and a majority of the programs offer community service opportunities at least twice a month. Like construction, community service opportunities provide young people with a tangible way to view their identity in relationship to their communities. One program director said: “[When they first come to YouthBuild] they think in terms of ‘I’ and ‘me’ rather than the community. Then they learn about the community service projects and get to see how they affect everything around them. Now it’s about community too.”

All the survey respondents also offered leadership training, mostly combined with other types of skills training. Survey respondents, as well as the subset who were interviewed,

stressed the importance of the Youth Policy Council — a committee similar to a student government that advises staff on program policies and activities — as a vehicle for young people to build leadership skills. Program directors reported providing a wide range of opportunities for participants through the policy council, including planning outreach events, representing the program to funders and policymakers, developing community service projects, and interviewing new staff members.

- **A culture that promotes a sense of community and fosters caring relationships between the staff and participants is the essence of YouthBuild and plays the biggest role in youth transformation.**

Similar to the findings in Ferguson and Snipes, program directors frequently used the words “family” and “community” to describe their programs, and said that if young people were to ask what mattered most to them during their experience in the program, they would point to the staff. A positive relationship with a caring adult has long been considered a key ingredient in youth development, and YouthBuild program directors said that these relationships provide the safety and consistency that participants lack at home, and are crucial in ensuring that young people seek necessary support after graduation to keep them on a path to long-term success.

Multiple program directors said that the quality of the program is only as strong as the staff that delivers the services, and one said: “Getting the right staff is key to your programming. The staff do make a difference and we see that throughout the YouthBuild program. Staff have to really understand the connection but still hold the young people to the expectations.” Hence, they emphasized, caring is about being demanding, not just about being supportive. According to the survey, a large share of YouthBuild staff members come from socioeconomic and community backgrounds similar to those of the participants, and many have faced similar challenges. Several staff members who were interviewed emphasized the importance of such shared experiences in building lasting connections, often echoing Ferguson and Snipes when they wrote, “Models and advisers who have successfully broken free from the street life are critically important for some young people who need both advice on how to complete the break and reassurance that they are not ‘selling out’ by making the effort.” Toward that end, a lot of the programs reported that they formally or informally involve YouthBuild graduates in provision of program services.

- **Program directors stressed the need for continued, postprogram services to follow up with YouthBuild graduates.**

As noted by Ferguson and Snipes, the stability of the changes that young people undergo in the program may depend on “how consistently the social environment supports them once the youths leave YouthBuild.” The external barriers to success that were present in young

people's lives before they got to YouthBuild continue to be present, and while programs strive to equip them with skills and tools to better navigate those barriers, young people need continued assistance to stay on track. One program director said: "When they work in the program, it has an impact on them that will last the rest of their lives. But they still need support when they leave, and that's my concern. We'll have students who still feel that connection to us wherever they are, but that doesn't mean that they're where they need to be."

YouthBuild programs that receive federal funding provide 9 to 12 months of follow-up services after participants graduate, but many program directors who were interviewed reported that they often lack resources to follow up consistently and to properly meet the needs of graduates; most directors reported increasing use of social media to stay in the lives of graduates in a low-cost way and to provide them with information and guidance. Program directors also emphasized that the doors of YouthBuild are always open to its graduates, and many take advantage of that fact long after they have left the program. One program director spoke of a participant who ran into trouble in the community and went to prison for a few months: "When he was released, the first thing he did was come back to YouthBuild and asked for help finding a job. The family and the community aspect, and the connection, is felt even 5 and 10 years later."

Conclusion

Since the early 1990s, when the formative evaluation was conducted, the YouthBuild program has spread to nearly 300 communities across the United States, touching the lives of many young adults. Over the years, the program model has undergone some changes to better meet the needs of its communities (offering training in vocations other than construction, for example). Yet the core values and principles of the YouthBuild model remain the same — emphasizing high standards, leadership development, a family-like culture, and responsibilities to one's community.

While limited in scope, the survey and interviews with YouthBuild program directors support the findings in Ferguson and Snipes from 20 years ago: "When young people are ready to change and the YouthBuild model is implemented well, it appears to have the components and qualities that they need to point their lives in a positive direction."⁷ This effort was not designed to be a rigorous evaluation of the impact of YouthBuild on its participants; instead it was launched to better understand some of the less tangible outcomes that the program is

⁷MDRC is currently conducting a randomized controlled evaluation of the YouthBuild program, which will examine the program's effects on young people's educational attainment, employment and earnings, involvement with the criminal justice system, and other outcomes for up to four years after program participation.

expected to affect, such as formation of positive identity, from the point of view of today's program leaders.

Findings from this follow-up study, as well as the Ferguson and Snipes paper, suggest that traditional measures of program success, including attainment of a GED certificate or a job, may not fully reflect all the potential benefits of the program. Participants who have been disconnected from school and work for a long time may find it difficult to pass the GED or find a job that pays a living wage in the short run; but by resetting the way they view themselves and their place in family and community life, YouthBuild could be a catalyst for long-term change. For example, many program directors spoke of the way YouthBuild improves parenting behaviors, with potential impacts on future generations.

The study also highlights the fact that the fortunes of disadvantaged and disconnected youth in this country have not improved in the last 20 years, and that YouthBuild continues to serve young people who are truly disadvantaged and at risk. Besides lifelong experience with poverty and public schools that did not fully meet their needs, half or more of the participants in a YouthBuild cohort enter the program with exposure to negative or traumatic experiences, according to program directors who responded to the survey. Many, if not most, of these young people face a long road to recovering from these experiences and attaining measurable success in education and employment. "Young people are bringing in 18 to 20 years of challenging life experiences to the table, and we can't expect to change all of that [during one program cycle]," said one program director.

Even those who successfully graduate from the program and attain a high school credential face a labor market where demand and wages for workers without postsecondary education have decreased significantly in the past three decades. The Great Recession of 2007-2009 has also taken an unprecedented toll on young people, with a steeper decline in youth employment than in any previous recession, as well as a very slow recovery.⁸ Research shows that entering the labor market during a recession can lead to economic "scarring" or substantial earnings losses for many years into the future.⁹ YouthBuild's influence on participants' motivation, perseverance, and optimism is critical as young people navigate their transition to adulthood in this challenging economic landscape.

Ronald Ferguson was not surprised to learn that his findings with Jason Snipes were largely affirmed by the new MDRC survey. Now as then, he said, effective YouthBuild programs "persuade young people that they are worthy to be taken seriously as learners, workers,

⁸Kathryn Anne Edwards and Alexander Hertel-Fernandez, *The Kids Aren't Alright: A Labor Market Analysis of Young Workers* (Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, 2010).

⁹Council of Economic Advisers, *15 Economic Facts About Millennials* (Washington, DC: Council of Economic Advisers, 2014), www.whitehouse.gov.

citizens, leaders, and friends,” and they allow a way for young people to signal to peers, family, employers, educators, and the community that they can be successful. This is important because participants who come to YouthBuild are often isolated from positive supports, he said: “Many peers on track for success tend to avoid them, disappointed parents tend to doubt and demean them, employers reject them, police suspect them, and society in general fears them. In cycles of self-fulfilling prophesy, their poor behaviors and unsuccessful performances have fueled mutual rejection between these young people and others upon whom they need to rely. Before they come to YouthBuild, their self-perceptions, behaviors, and reputations have aligned to become barriers that exclude them from pathways to successful adulthood.”

Ferguson also stressed the importance of a supportive social environment to keep young people on a positive trajectory once they leave the program: “Youth come out of the program hopeful, wanting to be a part of the world, as respected citizens. People need to give them the benefit of the doubt. They really need to be embraced and supported.” He said that our society has a responsibility to ensure that these young adults have options when they leave, including more choices to prepare for employment that does not require a college degree and greater employer participation in youth employment.

Achieving adulthood and self-sufficiency is challenging for most young people, but low-income youths face systemic barriers related to poverty, and often race, that make the transition even more daunting. Extended periods of disconnection from school and work during adolescence and young adulthood substantially increase the risk that a young person will live in poverty for an entire lifetime. Programs like YouthBuild reconnect participants to education and employment opportunities. They keep hope alive by building skills, expanding horizons, and fostering relationships. Participants finish with tools and reasons to continue striving — reasons for viewing themselves and the world in a more hopeful light than before the YouthBuild experience.

About MDRC

MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social and education policy research organization dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through its research and the active communication of its findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs.

Founded in 1974 and located in New York City and Oakland, California, MDRC is best known for mounting rigorous, large-scale, real-world tests of new and existing policies and programs. Its projects are a mix of demonstrations (field tests of promising new program approaches) and evaluations of ongoing government and community initiatives. MDRC's staff bring an unusual combination of research and organizational experience to their work, providing expertise on the latest in qualitative and quantitative methods and on program design, development, implementation, and management. MDRC seeks to learn not just whether a program is effective but also how and why the program's effects occur. In addition, it tries to place each project's findings in the broader context of related research — in order to build knowledge about what works across the social and education policy fields. MDRC's findings, lessons, and best practices are proactively shared with a broad audience in the policy and practitioner community as well as with the general public and the media.

Over the years, MDRC has brought its unique approach to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. Once known primarily for evaluations of state welfare-to-work programs, today MDRC is also studying public school reforms, employment programs for ex-offenders and people with disabilities, and programs to help low-income students succeed in college. MDRC's projects are organized into five areas:

- Promoting Family Well-Being and Children's Development
- Improving Public Education
- Raising Academic Achievement and Persistence in College
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Working in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada and the United Kingdom, MDRC conducts its projects in partnership with national, state, and local governments, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.

