

Organizational and Program Changes in youthCONNECT: What Happened and Why

In the summer of 2010, Venture Philanthropy Partners (VPP) announced the launch of “a pioneering collaboration of government, private philanthropy, nonprofit organizations, and evaluators to dramatically improve opportunities for low-income youth, ages 14-24, in the National Capital Region”¹ called youthCONNECT (yC). To evaluate the results and impact of this initiative, VPP, in partnership with Child Trends, collected information about the numbers, characteristics, and outcomes of the youth served through the collaboration. VPP was also interested in learning if and/or how participation in the network influenced changes within the partner organizations and how they do their work. They commissioned Child Trends to conduct an in-depth implementation evaluation to investigate these questions.

The findings of this evaluation have expanded our understanding of what this network truly accomplished. While previous reports about youthCONNECT focused on the overall implementation of the network, this brief will focus more specifically on the impact of the network on the organizations that comprised it between the summer of 2010 and early 2016. In addition to increasing and improving services to under-served youth in the National Capital Region, youthCONNECT was also responsible for contributing to a wide array of intra-organizational changes among its six partner agencies: College Summit-NCR (CS), KIPP DC, Latin American Youth Center (LAYC), Whitman-Walker Health (WWH, formerly Metro TeenAIDS),² Urban Alliance (UA), and Year Up-NCR (YU).



Programming

The creation of youthCONNECT undoubtedly increased the number of youth served by each of the partner organizations, but it also helped them introduce (and subsequently adapt) their programs into new environments as well. In 2013, the yC network piloted a place-based collaboration at the LAYC Career Academy (CA) to “provide vulnerable students with the wrap-around services, supports, and opportunities they need to successfully transition to a productive, self-sufficient adulthood.”³ The network’s intent with this endeavor was to explore what it could accomplish when the partners intentionally worked with each other to support youth in the same location—a true collaboration as opposed to a co-location of services. The Career Academy is not a conventional high school, however, like those in which some of the partners had worked before. The Career Academy serves a non-traditional student population and provides “youth ages 16-24 with college

¹ <http://www.vpppartners.org/news/announcements/venture-philanthropy-partners-awarded-4-million-social-innovation-fund-create-col>

² In 2010, Metro TeenAIDS (MTA) was selected to participate in youthCONNECT. In 2015, MTA became part of Whitman-Walker Health (WWH) in a new strategic collaboration. Hereafter, we will refer to MTA as WWH.

³ <http://www.vpppartners.org/learning/papers-and-perspectives/presidents-perspective/piloting-collaboration>

credits/AP-style classes; a rigorous and flexible GED, college preparatory curriculum; and career preparation in the healthcare and information technology fields.”⁴ Consequently, the Career Academy partnership, in particular, required organizations to re-envision their target populations, implementation settings, and in some cases, overall program models.

One KIPP DC staff member noted that the pilot at the Career Academy made them aware of their program’s limitations and that through participation in yC, they were able to adapt their program to work in alternative settings with different groups of youth, thereby building their organizational capacity. Through yC, LAYC was able to expand the reach of their Promotor Pathway program as well. Prior to yC, LAYC had been implementing the Promotor Pathway program—a long-term client management intervention model designed to help disconnected and disengaged youth make successful transitions to adulthood—as a community-based organization. A grant from the Social Innovation Fund (SIF) and the Career Academy partnership via youthCONNECT afforded LAYC the opportunity to implement and assess the program in a school setting for the first time. Making full use of their evaluation results and lessons learned, LAYC has since expanded the Promotor Pathway program into five additional public high schools across Prince George’s County, MD and Washington, D.C.



Through their work at the Career Academy, both Urban Alliance and College Summit also learned that their programs could serve disconnected or non-traditional youth. College Summit leveraged the knowledge and experience gained through this pilot to work with the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DYRS) in Washington, D.C., serving young people in the juvenile justice system. Of the five yC partners that participated in the pilot at the Career Academy, Urban Alliance continues to provide services as needed.

The Career Academy pilot was not the only inspiration. For example, prior to its participation in yC, Year Up did not offer services to youth who tested positive for substance use because of the inherent difficulties in retention with this population. Upon joining the network, YU observed how WWH and LAYC utilized counseling sessions involving a peer component, in which the youth learned from peers in conjunction—as opposed to exclusively—with a one-on-one exchange with a counselor. This was shown to improve retention rates for these youth. YU subsequently incorporated a similar counseling/treatment component into their own program, thereby substantially increasing the retention rate among these youth.

Performance Management

Beyond Career Academy, involvement in youthCONNECT in general contributed, over time, to improvements in the way the partners collect and use data to make improvements to their programs and organizations. Staff members across the network indicated that their work in yC has led to more precision in definition of metrics and indicators, more accurate assessment of outcomes, and improved accountability. According to a UA staff member, they were “able to tweak the program in real time” based on performance management data.

⁴ <http://www.laycca.org/>

In some cases, yC network partners utilized performance management data to improve how youth were being served by their program models. For example, UA looked beyond the average performance of their youth and identified those who needed additional supports within the existing model. In other instances, network partners used performance management data to make improvements to the models themselves. KIPP DC, for example, recognized that their existing KIPP Through College model, which required that youth attend events at their physical location, needed to be changed to a case management model in which case managers contacted youth in their schools and communities. In so doing, they redefined what it meant to have contact with young people, creating a measure for “meaningful contact” in order to distinguish between contacts made *on behalf* of young people versus those made with young people.

Business Operations

Six years after the inception of the yC initiative, several of the partner organizations directly attribute increases in staffing, expansions of programs, and/or changes in business models and practices to their participation in youthCONNECT.

LAYC added at least 10 new Promotors since the start of the initiative in 2010 as part of the expansion of its Promotor Pathway program.

In addition to its program expansion throughout the National Capital Region, LAYC is also gradually expanding the program into other jurisdictions with similar need. They have established two partnerships outside of the region thus far: one in Salem, OR and another in Costa Mesa, CA. “We want to create a national office where all of our replication sites would submit data to us so we can see where there are success or challenge areas where we can provide support,” noted one LAYC staff member. LAYC has thus fulfilled the promise of the SIF grant by expanding its promising program to reach larger numbers of vulnerable youth.



Another example is College Summit, which changed its entire business model since coming on board in 2010. Not long into the yC initiative, CS realized that their initial “fee-for-service” model would not be sustainable since the schools they worked with would not be able to pay for CS services after they stopped receiving subsidies via yC. CS spoke with their customers and learned what it was they liked best about their program, then they maintained these elements, restructured service delivery, and virtually eliminated everything else. “The mission is still the same, metrics are still the same...but how we do it is now fundamentally different,” one CS staff member noted. Participation in yC provided the organization with the insights that led to the realization that their organization needed to evolve and the financial means to stay afloat during the transition.

Why Organizations Changed

VPP convened semi-monthly meetings in which one or more staff members from each partner organization met together. Commonly, the larger group would meet in three smaller sub-groups: executive directors, data and evaluation staff, and program directors. While the executive director meetings cemented pre-existing relationships between several partners, the evaluation and program directors groups provided rich opportunities for peer-to-peer learning. Program directors

strengthened their management skills by working with other program directors from the partner organizations. Data and evaluation staff members noted that their group meetings, which were facilitated by Child Trends, resulted in changes to their information sources, collection, measurement, and application. The members of this group (who were often the sole data/evaluation specialists within their organization) greatly valued what they learned from colleagues in other agencies and Child Trends.

“The best use of time was really just members talking together about handling problems each one was having with collecting or processing data,” one data and accountability staff member mentioned. Members of this workgroup have since co-presented workshops at evaluation conferences and continue to stay in touch to share best practices around data collection. “We created links and interact quite often outside of youthCONNECT,” said one data and accountability staff member. Another noted, “We still email each other with questions about, say, how to do a certain survey, and everyone contributes advice.”



VPP operated as the backbone for youthCONNECT, supporting yC activities and intra-organizational changes in several ways. First, they provided the organizations with the wherewithal to manage federal funds. Second, they held organizations accountable for quarterly goals, which program directors credited with keeping them on track. Third, the place-based initiative piloted at the LAYC Career Academy contributed to organizations' greater understanding of their program models and how they operated in different settings and with different groups of youth. Finally, they elevated the stature and raised the visibility of several of the organizations, thereby making them stronger contenders for competitive national grants. Several partners made note that their involvement in youthCONNECT also helped them “tell their stories better,” ultimately changing the way they marketed themselves and their services to different audiences, and in fundraising efforts. “We received a lot of grants as a result of [our] yC involvement,” said one partner. Another indicated that the yC involvement improved their ability to bring on new partners. A third noted that “[yC] was an investment that...enabled us to take our work to the next level.”

Conclusion

youthCONNECT was established based on the premise that the whole can be greater than the sum of its parts. As far as the initiative's outcomes, each organization absolutely served more youth after joining yC than before, but the initiative led to positive changes within the organizations themselves as well. These changes, both large and small, resulted from a combination of economic support from the Social Innovation Fund, VPP investment capital and support, and yC activities like the Career Academy pilot, peer learning during work group meetings, and data reporting.

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