

Long-term effects of youth work internship: The Project Youth Extension Service approach



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ABSTRACT

A mixed-methods evaluation research study found that up to six years after engaging in a youth work internship, young adults ($N = 54$) continued to regard that training and experience (T&E) as highly important for their current work. Over 60% of respondents rated internship T&E as important or extremely important for performance on 36 of 40 competencies targeted. Competencies most valued are also critical to effectiveness in high-intensity, high-demand settings, including composure under stress, adapting to change, sustaining a positive approach. Respondents also offered their retrospective views affirming the importance of T&E for performance during internships. Recent (1–2 year alumni) and past (3–6 year alumni) interns' views of training effects were equally positive. Qualitative comments identified personal competencies (organization, confidence) as well as professional competencies (leadership, programming skills, communication) and career direction as significant benefits. Implications for practice, research, and policy are discussed.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine long-term effects of a youth work (YW) internship on participants' current work performance. In Project YES, college-age interns gained over 250 hours of training and experience (T&E) per year for one or more years as they planned and led activities with youth from military families. Current and past cohorts of interns were assessed on the importance of training and experience (T&E) in each of 40 research-based workforce competencies (Burrus et al., 2013). The study focused on effects of T&E on current work, but interns also provided retrospective ratings on the same items for performance during their internship. Finally, they commented on useful strategies, challenges that fostered growth, program influence on career direction, and made recommendations for program improvement.

1.1. Contribution to body of knowledge

This study contributes to the body of knowledge by describing benefits of YW training for novice YW, affirming earlier research for short-term (ST) effects of training for YW and providing new evidence for the continuing influence of T&E in diverse career settings over the long-term (LT). Quantitative evidence points to significant training effects on a broad range of behavioral competencies for both current

interns and alumni. Qualitative comments highlight a smaller set of competencies as well as personal growth and career commitments.

Findings provide implicit support for a training model featuring intensive and extended practice and reflection with peer teams and adult mentors, use of blended training, and scaffolded leadership opportunities. Results underline the importance of specialized training and practice beyond academic coursework and before transition to career work.

1.2. Why training/competence matters

Capable, committed youth workers (YW) influence youth program quality (YPQ) through supportive and challenging interactions that nurture positive youth development (PYD) outcomes (Durlak et al., 2010; Hurd & Deutsch, 2017; Smith & Bradshaw, 2017; Vandell & Lao, 2016). Effective training and support not only cultivate YW capabilities (Quinn et al., 2020; Newman, 2020), but build communities for problem solving, creativity, and mutual support (Hall et al., 2020; White et al., 2020). Quality training and support do not insure job commitment (Evans et al., 2010; Shanahan & Shehan, 2020) but can facilitate leadership that strengthens organizations and communities (Garst et al., 2019; Robideau & Santi, 2020; Shockley & Thompson, 2012).

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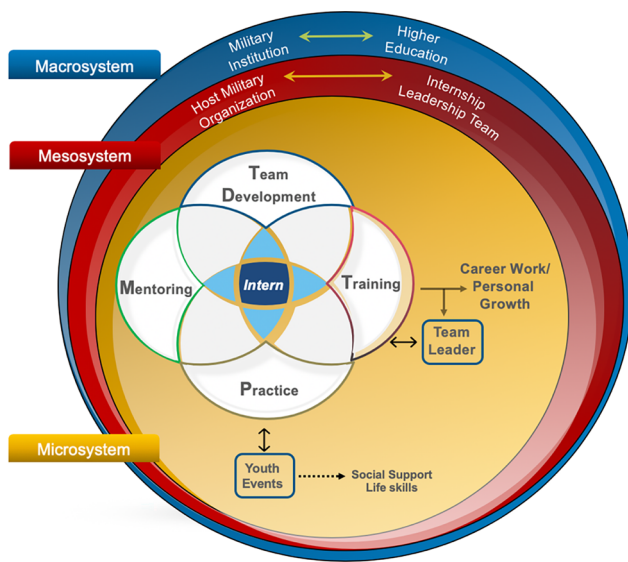


Fig. 1. Project YES conceptual overview.

1.3. Gaps in practice and research

Several YW development venues emerged in the past decade, including certification (Curry et al., 2013; Dodge, 2020; Shockley & Thompson, 2012), graduate programs (Garst et al., 2019; Walker & Walker, 2012), and professional development initiatives (Borden, Conn, Mull, & Wilkins, 2020; Walker & Walker, 2012) targeting primarily more experienced YW. Comparatively less is known about training efforts and effects with pre-career YW (Barcelona et al., 2011; Borden et al., 2011; Hartje et al., 2008). Research and practice with front-line YW, often including early career YW, points to benefits of systematic training, hands-on practice, and reflection with peers and experts (Akiva et al., 2017; Larson & Walker, 2010; Vance & Goldberg, 2020). A few specialized venues such as youth camps (Epley et al., 2017; Wahl-Alexander et al., 2018) and service learning (Ash & Clayton, 2009) document short-term knowledge and skill growth for undergraduates. These reports focus on somewhat different competencies and delivery methods, but offer no evidence for long-term effects. In addition, there is relatively little research about the intensity, frequency, duration, and breadth of training needed for novice YW to perform effectively in youth-facing (Fox et al., 2013; Hartje et al., 2008) and leadership (Peluso, 2017) roles or subsequent impact on youth served by trainees.

2. Theory and research background

Fig. 1 presents a conceptual model of training elements and outcomes. Theory-driven programming is much needed and often neglected in youth development (Arnold & Silliman, 2017). Thus, at program initiation, Project YES leaders were keen to develop a logic model for intern training and youth programming (Project YES, 2011) and subsequently identify connections to developmental and learning theories (Silliman, Edwards, & Johnson, 2020). The overall approach to programming and training is guided by the ecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), which describes multiple levels of interactive systems that influence individual development. More specifically, the Community Action framework (Gambone et al., 2002), illustrates how macro-system institutions (e.g., governing military family support and university outreach) collaborate through mesosystem agencies (e.g., funding and program delivery partners) that negotiate performance expectations and accountability for intern training and military youth programming.

From the perspective of Developmental Systems and Positive Youth Development frameworks (Benson et al., 2011; Lerner et al., 2012),

training and programming promote developmental assets of young adult interns (Scales et al., 2016) and military youth (Easterbrooks et al., 2013) through programs with qualities such as safety, support, skill-building, and norms of inclusion and teamwork (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Intern competencies reflect research- and practice-based 21st century workforce skills (Burrus et al., 2013), Universal Competency Framework (Bartram, 2012), 4-H Professional Research and Knowledge Competencies (Stone & Rennekamp, 2004), and practice standards for YW professional development (Walker & Gran, 2010).

Learning theories applied to intern training and youth programming are grounded in Social Cognition/Self-Efficacy theory (Bandura, 2001). Training and programming delivered through experiential learning (Dewey, 1910; Kolb, 2015) cultivate multiple sources of self-efficacy (Bandura, 2001): (1) personal performance; (2) vicarious experiences of watching others, modeling, or mentoring; (3) verbal persuasion via encouragement of positive behaviors or discouragement of negative behaviors; and (4) physiological and emotional perceptions of stress. These experiences are punctuated through critical reflection (Ash & Clayton, 2009) and consistent with best practices for building expertise (Akiva et al., 2017; Walker & Walker, 2012).

2.1. Competencies and competence in youth work

Youth workers (YW) (Walker & Walker, 2012) or youth development leaders (YDL) (Garst et al., 2019) in non-formal learning organizations serve diverse settings (community organizations, afterschool programs, camps, projects) and fulfill diverse roles (e.g., planner, facilitator, trainer, mentor, counselor, manager, supervisor) that require a broad range of competencies, or essential knowledge, attitudes, and behavioral skills. Diverse organizations identify similar core competencies, including program planning, developmentally appropriate practice, behavior management, cultural competence, and professionalism (Curry et al., 2013; Garst et al., 2019; Newman, 2020; Vance & Goldberg, 2020). The National Afterschool Association (2011) identified similar core knowledge competencies across multiple roles and experience levels, adaptable to state standards of practice and training (Warner et al., 2018). Expanding on the 4-H Professional Research, Knowledge, and Competency Framework (Stone & Rennekamp, 2004), Fox et al. (2013) specified levels of expertise in competencies, expert to novice, following the National Institutes of Health. (n.d) proficiency scale model. Krauss et al. (2012) identified competency in developmental practice, care and concern, and integrity in ethics and relationships as critical elements of professionalism among Malaysian youth workers.

2.1.1. Certification and related training

Several organizations established competency standards and certification requirements, some offering training and others identifying criteria for professional development and certification. The Child and Youth Care Certification Board (CYCCB) developed a certification program to unify and enhance standards and performance across YW fields (Curry et al., 2013). Although not a training approach, the program requires rigorous evidence of education and experience in a broad range of competencies including (1) professionalism; (2) cultural and human diversity; (3) applied human development; (4) relationship and communication; and (5) developmental practice methods (Curry et al., 2013). A validation study of applicants (average experience of 9.9 years) revealed that individuals completing certification (27% of the sample) were 2.7 times more likely to be rated as high performers by supervisors.

Despite growing consensus on YW competencies and organizational practices, certification initiatives face ongoing challenges with capacity-building. Although CYCCB certificate-holders were highly rated by supervisors, less than one third of applicants met certification requirements even with several years of training and experience. A decade-long certificate program designed to enhance retention and

program quality in New York City youth programs indicated short-term improvement in practices, career advancement, and advancement to leadership but engaged only 256 participants, with 108 graduates (Shockley & Thompson, 2012). Beyond Boston (Dodge, 2020) noted similar pattern of positive impacts on certified program quality observers and the programs and colleagues they influenced, but limited sharing and 20–25% non-completion. In California, statewide SEL-based afterschool staff training/certification documented staff and program improvements that were limited by lack of system capacity to support SEL training (Vance & Goldberg, 2020).

2.2. Professional development models

Although many YW settings have no professional development requirements, those in afterschool and early childhood education typically must complete state-mandated training hours. Practitioners acknowledge that training is often experienced as inconvenient, inequitable, irrelevant, or disempowering and that mandated classes on technical competencies provide no guarantee of higher-quality practice (Cunniën, 2017). By contrast, program-relevant, interactive and reflective learning cohorts in face-to-face (Abraham, 2017) or online (Robideau & Santi, 2020; Shanahan & Shehan, 2020) contexts are often more conducive to retention, professional growth, and program quality improvement than instructional workshops.

More intensive and extended training provides further promise for competence-building. Child-adult interaction is a critical element of quality, but can be inconsistent, thus provides an appropriate target for training (Akiva et al., 2017, as cited in Smith et al., 2010). Akiva et al. (2017) reviewed YW professional development approaches. They found Quality Improvement Systems (QIS) based on standards including assessment, training, and coaching were somewhat more effective than a General Training (GT) or workshop-based approaches for changing youth work practices and program quality. They developed and tested a strengths-based (vs. problem-focused) approach, Simple Interactions (SI), that combined features of QIS with training and coaching focused on YW strengths and learning in everyday situations. The SI model used guided reflection on short videos of trainee child interaction, focused on themes of connection (affective awareness), reciprocity (balanced roles of engagement), participation (involvement of children), and progression (incremental challenge). After ten months of SI training, participants affirmed the value of the learning process and reported improvements in practices that matched observations of experts who reviewed videos before and after training.

Three YW training models reviewed by Walker and Walker (2012) (e.g., a graduate program, Youth Matters professional development initiative, and experiential training course) promoted leadership competence through deliberative practice including: (1) cultivation of reflective practice as a group, working together and challenging each other as well as offering mutual support; (2) use of real-world practice dilemmas to facilitate professional judgment; (3) sustained practice over time; and (4) use of writing to articulate the language of the field and facilitate critical thinking. Rather than reducing practice to mastery of *technical competencies* (following rules, procedures), this focus on *competence* reflects "...active integration of knowledge, activities, skills, and [learning in the] moment that together are necessary to do the job that has to be done at high levels of quality and consistency" (Baizerman, 2009, as cited in Walker & Walker, 2012).

2.3. Competencies and competence across professional fields

Emphasis on gaining competence through practice is embraced by a broad range of vocations. The Universal Competency Framework (UCF) (Bartram, 2012, pp. 3–4) defines *competencies* as "...sets of behaviors that are instrumental in the delivery of desired results." *Competence* reflects "...the ability to apply knowledge, understanding, and skills (e.g., competencies) in performing to the standards required in

employment," typically problem solving to meet changing demands. Organizational results flow from matching worker competencies (e.g., specific job behaviors) and occupational potential (e.g., motives, traits, values, and cognitive abilities) (National Center for O*NET Development, 2020). Burrus et al. (2013) identifies analytic, interpersonal, executive, adaptive, information processing, and life skills as critical 21st century skills in a wide variety of career fields. In youth development, organizational results include facilitating teamwork among staff (Walker & Walker, 2012) and promoting high-quality positive youth development activities for youth (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

2.4. Undergraduate and pre-service training

Although many YW enter the field without an academic degree (Garst et al., 2019), an increasing number of aspiring YW pursue undergraduate degrees in diverse fields of study (Borden et al., 2011) that often offer practice experiences (e.g., work placements, internships, and service learning) to complement coursework. However, few report program effects. A national survey of YW, 70% of whom had a college degree, found that many lacked skills to perform in their current job and thus were likely to leave the field (Hartje et al., 2008). Those who had experiences of practice-with-reflection, mentoring, and training on topics specific to their job were more likely to remain in the field.

Broader research on internship experiences points to the value of work that provides for challenging tasks and opportunities to make meaningful contributions, and mentoring that promotes interpersonal and critical thinking skills, personal management, career navigation and networking skills (Binder et al., 2015; Parker et al., 2016; Velez & Giner, 2015). Recreation leader (Barcelona et al., 2011) and camp counselor experiences (Epley et al., 2017; Halsall et al., 2016; Leff et al., 2015; Wahl-Alexander et al., 2018), while typically brief and focused, can foster technical skills as well as professional judgment, and may be reinforced by repeated training and practice for multiple seasons with progressive leadership roles.

Service learning also provides a wide range of practical experiences that complement academic learning (Cashman & Siefer, 2008; Felten & Clayton, 2011; Held et al., 2019; Molee et al., 2010; Hurd & Schlatter, 2007), especially where experiential learning is complemented by critical reflection on program objectives and personal growth (Ash & Clayton, 2009). Shek and Yu (2016) integrated a similar model into undergraduate courses to promote three types of cognitive competence critical to academic, vocational, and health effects: "know what" (knowledge acquisition), "know how" (process skills), and "know why" (reflection on thinking).

2.5. Graduate education

A graduate program in youth development leadership (YDL) that featured online knowledge learning conjoined with reflection-on-practice with peer cohorts fostered self-reported improvements in outcomes at multiple levels: (1) professionalism (knowledge and application of theory, confidence, teamwork and leadership, and career advancement); (2) organizational practices (program development and quality; staff hiring, management, training); and (3) community engagement (community collaboration; program access) (Garst et al., 2019). Respondents represented graduates over a nine-year span, thus indicate short- and long-term effects of training.

2.6. Summary of competence-building initiatives

Research and practice in the last two decades have revealed what YW need to learn, how it is best learned, and why training has impact on program quality. Despite consensus on core and supportive competencies (National Afterschool Association, 2011; Vance, 2010), YW training was limited (Borden et al., 2011; Hartje et al., 2008), and

focused on knowledge and technical skills (Cunniën, 2017). More recently, intensive and extended training on interaction, program development, and problem solving (Akiva et al., 2017; Newman, 2020; Walker & Walker, 2012) complemented by reflection with peers and supportive mentors (Garst et al., 2019; Robideau & Santi, 2020) yielded evidence for improvement of practice competence consistent with the broader workforce development field (Burrus, et al., 2013). More broadly, internships (Velez & Giner, 2015) and service learning (Ash & Clayton, 2009) benefit participants in similar ways, through challenging practice, reflection, and mentor support. At present, evidence for T&E benefits in the short term is limited, and evidence for long-term impact rare, and typically focused on in-service rather than pre-career YW.

3. Program description and research hypotheses

3.1. Program model

Project YES is an initiative of the US Department of Defense Office of Employer Program and Policy and the US Department of Agriculture's National Institute of Food and Agriculture through a cooperative agreement with the authors' institution. The primary objective of the program is to implement a high-quality national internship program engaging college students motivated to serve the needs of National Guard and Reserve Component (RC) military families during all phases of deployment. Project YES interns work with military youth, ages 6–17, participating in Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program (YRRP) events, by facilitating evidence-based educational activities that promote leadership, life skills, and resilient behaviors. Additionally, interns learn leadership and career readiness skills. The program has employed 167 interns between 2010 and 2019 and served 28,373 military youth at 920 national and international events.

The Project YES intern training model and exit survey results are described elsewhere (Silliman et al., 2020). Interns engaged in 55–60 hours of orientation and 24–30 hours of mid-year on-site training, with 2 hours of virtual training monthly as well as intensive debriefing following youth events. Training focuses on understanding and practice of core competencies derived from the U.S. Department of Labor O*NET model (Burrus et al., 2013) and 4-H Professional Research, Knowledge, and Competency Framework (Stone & Rennekamp, 2004) (see Table 2). Interns also gain skills in using 4-H curricula, program planning and delivery, and teamwork, and gain understanding of youth development as well as military families, organization, and culture. Interns serve for one year, working in teams and leading one or two events per month. Interns who perform well may apply to continue in leadership positions through which they coordinate teams, mentor peers, and develop curricula and training. A majority of interns (58%) serve for more than one year.

3.2. Research hypotheses

Consistent with program goals for competency training and career readiness, this study examined the long-term effects of internship T&E for performance of 40 competencies in nine skill sets. Based on exit evaluation results (Silliman et al., 2020) and broader research in the field, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- 1) Interns will rate all 40 core competencies as moderately to highly important for performance in their current work in helping professions, since competencies were derived from evidence-based models and intensively taught and practiced throughout the internship;
- 2) Alumni, relative to current interns, will rate T&E effects higher, since their extended practice of competencies and time for reflection and maturity might heighten the perceived *relevance* of internship T&E. Alternatively, current interns might rate T&E higher due to *recency* of impact, less time for erosion of training effects, and/or

fewer experiences that supplant the importance of internship by further training;

3) Overall, interns will rate T&E effects higher, on average, for current work than for internship, due to cumulative experience and practice since entering internship.

4) Interns will rate Working with People, Adapting to Change, Coping with Pressures, and Presenting (relative to other competency scales) as most important for performance in current work, consistent with program exit surveys and prior research on professional effectiveness and burnout.

4. Methods

This study was conducted in fulfillment of accountability, program improvement, and scholarship dissemination purposes of the program funder (Department of Defense Office of Employer Programs and Policy and the Department of Agriculture, National Institute of Food and Agriculture).

The evaluator (principal author) was recruited and supported for conduct of the study by the grant principal investigator and national director (secondary authors). The study was reviewed and approved by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at the authors' institution. Potential respondents learned the purpose of the study and provided a link to the Qualtrics secure online platform through an e-mail from the Project YES national director. Participation was voluntary and responses to the mixed method online survey were confidential and anonymous.

4.1. Participants and procedures

A total of 120 interns served in Project YES from 2010 to 2017, 115 of whom were located and invited to participate in the study. Of 59 respondents, 54 (47%) completed all items. Participants included 34 of 82 alumni (41%) and 20 of 33 current interns (61%). Of those responding ($N = 39$), 85% identified as female, 15% as male; 2.6% identified as Asian and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, 15.8% as Black or African American, 76.3% as White, and 5.2% as multi-racial. Ten percent of those responding to the item ($N = 4/40$) identified as Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish. With regard to education, 5% of 40 responding completed an Associate degree, 47.5% a Bachelors, 45% a Masters, and 2.5% a Doctorate. Almost half (45%) of respondents ($N = 40$) identified as employed, with 30% in school or training, 7.5% employed and volunteering, and 2.5% volunteering. Intern service ranged from less than one year (11, 9.2%), 1 year (16, 10.8%), 1–2 years (55, 13.3%), 2–3 years (23, 19.2%), 3–4 years (13, 10.8%), 4 + years (2.7%). Of those who responded, 27.5% served as Room Leader (peer mentor) more than two years, 35% served 1–2 years, and 15% did not serve as a Room Leader. Twenty percent of the sample served as a Team Leader for more than two years, 22.5% for 1–2 years, 12.5% for less than one year, and 45% did not serve as Team Leader.

4.2. Measures

4.2.1. Quantitative measures

A modified version of the intern exit survey (Silliman et al., 2020), including demographic items, asked respondents to rate the *importance of internship training and experience* (T&E) on each of 40 YW competencies relative to performance in their current workplace. The survey focus was restricted to behavioral competencies to maintain consistency with exit survey and training priorities, reduce response burden and thus maximize response rate. Items resemble technical skills or simple rules, but were taught, practiced, and critically analyzed as heuristics for practice and problem solving within a holistic, developmentally-appropriate program delivery model. Thus, from a Symbolic Interaction perspective (Blumer, 1969), respondents would likely view items as “more than simple rules.” From a Self-Efficacy perspective (Bandura,

Table 1
Importance of training and experience for performance on competencies by scale during internship and in current work: Scale reliabilities and cohort mean score and effect size comparisons by time frame and scale.

Scale (acronym, Items)	DS ^a	Importance During Internship			ES	Importance for Current Work			ES
		Interns (N = 31)	Alumni (N=19)	U test/ p-value		Interns (N = 27)	Alumni (N = 15)	U test/ p-value	
Adapting to Change (ATC, 4 items)	α	0.850	0.618	0.151	0.00	0.932	0.786	0.069	0.03
	M	4.58	4.58	0.698		4.63	4.65	0.793	
	SD	0.61	0.45			0.53	0.56		
Coping with Pressure (CPW, 6 items)	α	0.940	0.868	0.001	0.28	0.914	0.898	1.106	0.27
	M	4.47	4.64	0.975		4.43	4.59	0.293	
	SD	0.76	0.45			0.59	0.54		
Working with People (WWP, 5 items)	α	0.830	0.756	0.745	0.26	0.940	0.918	0.614	0.27
	M	4.45	4.61	0.388		4.45	4.65	0.433	
	SD	0.70	0.51			0.87	0.64		
Delivering Results (DEL, 5 items)	α	0.784	0.836	0.891	0.38	0.754	0.856	1.803	0.62
	M	4.32	4.55	0.345		4.24	4.24	0.179	
	SD	0.73	0.52			0.76	0.76		
Learning Mindset (LRN, 4 items)	α	0.893	0.720	4.457	0.58*	0.729	0.765	0.733	0.34
	M	4.20	4.54	0.035*		4.27	4.53	0.391	
	SD	0.64	0.56			0.89	0.69		
Positive Work Ethic (PWE, 4 items)	α	0.847	0.797	4.88	0.80*	0.859	0.748	0.832	0.39
	M	4.14	4.66	0.027*		4.47	4.70	0.362	
	SD	0.81	0.53			0.77	0.51		
Following Procedures (FIP, 4 items)	α	0.836	0.780	1.06	0.49*	0.809	0.772	1.00	0.41
	M	4.08	4.43	0.303		4.22	4.52	0.317	
	SD	0.88	0.60			0.86	0.66		
Presentation Skills (PRES, 5 items)	α	0.892	0.635	3.246	0.60*	0.862	0.798	1.51	0.54
	M	4.07	4.48	0.072		4.23	4.60	0.219	
	SD	0.89	0.49			0.86	0.59		
Applying Technology (AT, 3 items)	α	0.948	0.857	1.06	0.34*	0.939	0.963	1.841	0.35
	M	3.49	3.84	0.303		3.58	3.99	0.175	
	SD	1.08	1.01			1.58	1.17		

Notes: DS^a = Descriptive Statistics; ES = Effect Size; α = Cronbach (1951) alpha score for internal reliability of scale; M = scale mean; SD = scale standard deviation; * p-value.

1984), self-assessment likely reflects actual behavior, particularly since competencies were learned and practiced through critical self-reflection and multiple source feedback. Respondent anonymity and program completion were designed to decrease social desirability bias. For purposes of comparison, respondents were asked to provide retrospective ratings on the importance of T&E for performance during internship.

4.2.2. Qualitative measures

To enhance understanding of participants’ experiences (Creswell & Plano, 2018, p. 169) and inform future research on program effects open-ended questions asked for descriptions and examples on four topics:

- 1) topics, strategies, or tools learned that were useful beyond internship;
- 2) preparation and support for internship challenges, struggles, and failures;
- 3) internship influence on education and career decisions; and
- 4) program improvements in specific areas and overall.

4.3. Analysis

4.3.1. Quantitative analysis

Given the small sample and cohort sizes, quantitative analysis focused on descriptive and simple inferential statistics, using R (Navarro, 2015; R Core and Team, 2018; Wickham & Bryan, 2018; Xie, 2016). Items were grouped into nine scales, consistent with analysis of exit survey data. Hypothesis 2 was tested using Mann-Whitney non-parametric independent samples tests to compare intern and alumni ratings by scale and time. Hypothesis 3 employed Kruskal-Wallis non-parametric paired samples tests to compare cohort ratings (combined) by

scale and time. Effect size tests followed both paired samples tests. Hypothesis 4 was tested via ANOVA on scales for each time frame, followed by Tukey HSD tests.

4.3.2. Qualitative analysis

Responses to open-ended questions were coded using inductive content analysis, beginning with descriptive codes, then proceeding to focused codes as described by Saldana (2013) to identify broader categories and themes. Content analysis was used as “a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories...” (Stemler, 2001, p. 144). Garst et al. (2019) employed a similar process to document benefits of a graduate education for youth workers. Because content analysis relies on subjective interpretation text (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005p. 1278), two coders were used to strengthen data interpretation (e.g., triangulation) and reduce coder bias (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Hrushka et al., 2004). Positionally, coders were familiar with the program and advocates for non-formal learning. After developing and practicing with a codebook (Hrushka et al., 2004) on question 1, coders worked independently, reading and re-reading narratives by participant, then by item, using reflection akin to constant comparison and checking for discrepant responses (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Finally, coders compared notes and established consensus on the few items they coded differently. The data was then entered into NVivo (Version 12) statistical software and certain codes were cross-checked within and between questions.

For questions related to useful strategies and challenges, salient codes were identified and recurring codes grouped by themes, consistent with program competencies (e.g., programming skills, adaptability, leadership and teamwork, communication) and emergent theme of personal growth and professional qualities (e.g., self-awareness, disciplines, professional identity), consistent with Burrus et al. (2013). These codes and themes were also evident in responses to the career

Table 2

Percentage of respondents indicating that internship training and experience were important for performance on selected competencies: Cohort comparisons by time frame and scale.

Scale/Number of Items	Moderately or Extremely Important			
	During Internship		Current Work	
	Interns	Alumni	Interns	Alumni
Adapting to Change (ATC)				
Change to fit new challenges	89.5*	100*	100*	88.8*
Adjust schedule but stick to objectives	89.4*	96.8*	93.8*	96.5*
Learn new roles and strategies	94.7*	100*	87.5*	96.5*
Be prepared for emergencies	89.5*	71.0*	93.8*	82.2*
Coping with Pressures (CWP)				
Learning from mistakes as well as successes	89.4*	93.6*	75.1*	96.4*
Having a positive attitude, future focus	84.3*	93.5*	81.3	92.9*
Composure in difficult situations	84.2*	96.8*	87.6*	96.4*
Accepting criticism calmly, not personally	84.2*	90.3*	81.3	92.8*
Aware of stress in self	84.2*	74.2*	68.5*	82.2*
Aware of stress in others	84.2*	87.1*	62.5*	82.2*
Working with People (WWP)				
Give full attention when others are talking	78.9*	83.8*	87.5*	89.3*
Asking appropriate questions at the right time	79.0	90.3*	80.0	82.2*
Actively looking for ways to help people	79.0	96.8*	87.5*	92.9*
Showing respect for others' views	84.2*	93.5*	87.6*	96.4*
Adapting behavior to each group	100*	93.6*	93.8*	100*
Delivering Results (DEL)				
Focus on others' needs and satisfaction	78.9*	93.5*	75.0*	89.3*
Consistently achieving project goals	94.2*	83.9*	75.0*	89.3*
Encouraging others to quality work	73.7*	87.1*	81.3*	82.2*
Using change as opportunity to learn and grow	89.5	93.5*	81.3*	81.3*
Relating well to people of different cultures	79.0	93.5*	81.3*	96.4*
Learning Mindset (LRN)				
Select developmentally-appropriate methods	84.2*	81.3*	90.3*	89.3*
Concentrating on a task	84.2*	93.8*	93.6*	92.9*
Knowing where to go for answers	73.7*	87.5*	83.8*	75.0*
Positive approach to projects	84.2*	93.8*	90.3*	92.9*
Positive Work Ethic (PWE)				
Becoming reliable and dependable in my work	68.4*	96.8*	81.3*	96.4*
Doing what I say I am going to do	73.7*	96.7*	87.5*	89.3*
Acting responsibly to community, environment	63.2*	83.8*	68.8*	89.3*
Aware of my impact of my behavior on others	79.0*	90.3*	87.6*	92.8*
Following Instructions and Procedures (FIP)				
Effective time management	84.3*	87.1*	87.6*	89.3*
Attention to detail and thoroughness	73.7*	93.6*	81.3*	92.9*
Comfortable following without challenging	52.6*	64.5*	62.6*	78.5
Tracking and organizing information at work	73.7*	90.3*	68.8	85.7*
Presentation Skills (PRES)				
Communicating for understanding	89.5*	96.8*	93.8*	89.3*
Comfort making presentations	78.9*	96.8*	75.0	89.3*
Responding quickly to others' feedback	68.4	87.1*	68.8*	78.6*
Projecting personal credibility	73.7*	80.6*	81.3*	92.9
Producing written reports for different audiences	47.4*	80.6*	62.6	92.8*
Applying Technology (AT)				
Finding ways to better use technology in projects	47.4*	64.5*	62.6	60.7
Learning new systems and processes	68.4	71.0*	56.3	75.0
Sharing technology knowledge with others	52.6	51.6*	43.8	67.9

Note: % indicated moderately important (MI) or extremely important (EI); * indicates no responses for that item were "not at all important".

influence question, although responses related to career direction and readiness were predominant. Improvements questions (1–4) resulted in unique codes associated with training, policies and practices, as well as positive comments.

5. Results and findings

5.1. Quantitative findings

Hypothesis 1 was confirmed, as evident in scale means, which ranged between 3.58 and 4.70 on a 5-point scale for long-term effects, and means of 3.49 to 4.66 for short-term, as indicated in Table 1. Percentage distribution of responses by item, cohort, and time frame, seen in Table 2, more graphically illustrates this positive pattern. Over

60% of current interns rated 36/40 competencies as moderately or extremely important for internship performance and 38/40 for experiences beyond the internship. Over 60% of alumni also rated 39/40 competencies favorably for internship and 40/40 for current work. By contrast, few items reflected more than 10% negative responses (e.g., "not at all important" or "slightly important"). For current interns, this included 8/40 items on intern performance, 10/40 on contexts beyond internship. For alumni, this included 2/40 items on intern performance, 4/40 on contexts beyond internship.

Hypothesis 2 was not confirmed, as comparisons of importance ratings by cohort (e.g., intern vs. alumni) for each scale found only two significant differences for the internship time frame, and no differences for the current work time frame. In tests for effect size (Cohen's d), all but one scale yielded greater than the 0.24 threshold identified by

Cuijpers (2017) as potentially clinically significant, although none reached $p < .05$ statistical significance. These results, included in Table 1, likely reflect ceiling effects and small sample size. Based on these results, cohorts were combined for subsequent analyses.

Hypothesis 3 was not confirmed, as ratings (combined cohorts) for internship relative to current work were not significantly different on any scale, and effect size coefficients were all below 0.24.

Hypothesis 4 was partially confirmed in relation to the priority of competence indicators, with Adapting to Change, Working with People, Coping with Pressures, and Presentation Skills rated highest by mean and percentage of moderate and extremely important scores. Variations in scale order were evident by cohort and time frame. Scale ratings were not statistically different except for comparisons with Applying Technology, which was significantly lower than all other scales. Overall, alumni ratings trended higher than current intern ratings, but not significantly so.

5.2. Qualitative findings

Question 1: Useful topics, strategies, and tools

Two themes constructed from respondent comments ($N = 38/54$) identified the usefulness of workforce competencies and growth in personal and professional identity. Comments on improvements and assets are discussed below. A small set of competencies accounted for 73% of codes: programming, adaptability, leadership and teamwork, communication (see Table 3). These sub-themes were similar to although not synonymous with competency scales. Narratives often reflected integration of competencies, as follows: “Learning how to *plan* activities and *work with a team to implement curriculum* has translated into me being more *organized* at work and *planning ahead*...” (emphasis added). Sub-themes related to personal and professional identity (27% of codes) were reciprocally-related to competence indicators. For instance, confidence was described as a consequence of practicing skills: “Project YES helped me become more confident in myself and my abilities” and as a foundation for current work: “...managing a room of many kids (during internship) has given me more confidence when speaking in front of large groups of people.” Competencies and personal qualities were found useful in diverse settings (e.g., school, training and counseling in community and military programs, human resources, corporate technical assistance, entrepreneurship, graduate school) and audiences (e.g., children, youth, adults).

Question 2: Challenges, support and ramifications

Workforce competencies and personal growth themes were about evenly represented in respondent comments ($N = 38/54$) on challenges during internship. Challenges often reflected both themes as when growth in leadership and teamwork entailed working through personal differences in work ethic or personal style or adapting to program changes stretched capacities for motivation and self-discipline. Most seemed satisfied with staff support; some noted limits of training while others preferred additional support. Comments on communication were focused primarily on responding to youth under stress.

Responses to the first two questions, aside from a few complaints about others' work ethic, make no mention of competencies such as reliability, integrity, achieving project goals, or applying technology and little mention of program planning, behavior management, or handling criticism. Professionalism and adaptability are frequently mentioned, although not clearly defined.

Further queries found that equal percentages of alumni and interns responded to qualitative items. Alumni were more likely to cite professionalism and time management as useful, and as challenging, to describe current work applications, and to make positive comments. Comments on conflicts with staff came from 2 recent interns. About two-thirds of each group commented, and the length and depth of

comments were equivalent.

Question 3: Internship influence on career direction and readiness

Nearly all respondents ($N = 30/54$) indicated that the internship reinforced or changed their career direction in terms of type of job, work role, or age group served. About 30% also described internship experiences that enhanced skills, confidence, and sense of readiness. Many expressed gratitude for opportunities to work with youth and/or military families, with several anticipating careers with those groups.

Question 4: Improvements and positive comments

Improvement comments were offered by 7–8 respondents on questions 1 and 2, and by 22 of 28 respondents to question 4. As indicated in Table 3, training was most often addressed, with team-building and conflict resolution, time and stress management, youth development, diversity and cultural competence cited 2–3 times each. A few suggested changes to training schedules, greater diversity in interns and staff, and improvements in mentoring, event supervision, and peer leader selection.

The mentor career development project was cited by several respondents for improvements, including providing more time, structure, options, and support. Some of these as well as other peers acknowledged that the project positively contributed to personal and career development. Respondents offered nearly as many unsolicited positive comments on specific elements (e.g., mentor project, practice experiences, staff mentoring) and the internship overall.

Relationships with staff, peers, and youth was a significant theme across questions discussed above. Several interns noted that encouragement by and accountability to program staff nurtured personal strengths, maturity, self-discipline, and self-confidence. Peer relations included both positive (e.g., collaboration, mutual support, appreciation of different perspectives) and negative (e.g., poor work ethic, conflict) experiences. One alumna noted that “Project YES taught me patience and understanding when working with youth and their families. I feel that I can truly relate to youth at a far deeper level because of the training received with Project YES.”

6. Discussion

This study corroborates our own (Silliman et al., 2020) and others' (Akiva et al., 2017; Robideau & Santi, 2020; Shanahan & Shehan, 2020) evidence for short-term effects of intensive training and experience (T&E) to develop a wide range of professional/workforce competence indicators (Burrus et al., 2013) and provides the first evidence of which we are aware for continuing effects in current work 1–6 years later. Survey ratings implicitly affirm and comments often explicitly endorse the value of hands-on learning with critical reflection found in other internships (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Binder et al., 2015) and YW professional development (Akiva et al., 2017; Hartje et al., 2008; Walker & Walker, 2012). A response rate of 47% matches norms of 20–50% for internal and online surveys (Koundinya et al., 2017; Nulty, 2008) though not the 70% recommended by Dillman (2000). Scale reliability scores were high, indicating consistency of responses for groups and conditions.

6.1. Development of competencies

Current interns and alumni strongly affirmed the importance of internship T&E for their practice of all 40 competencies, with the vast majority of respondents endorsing the highest ratings and rarely selecting lower ratings. Since T&E was designed for and monitored during internship, such positive views are not surprising. However, equally positive ratings by respondents in career fields as varied as youth work, teaching, counseling, human relations, and customer service speaks to

Table 3
Qualitative themes across open-ended questions.

Themes/Sub-themes by Question	Salient Codes	Frequency (n, %)
1: What topics, strategies, or tools learned during internship are useful in your current work?		
professional competencies (71)		
/Programming skills (26)	program planning, selecting curricula and activities	4 (15.4)
	public speaking, facilitation, implementation, adapting curricula to audiences*, behavior management	14 (53.8)
	debriefing and use of DEAL	6 (23.1)
	experience in working with youth	2 (7.7)
/Adapting thinking and behavior to changing conditions* (8)	adaptability, flexibility, resilience (general)	8 (100.0)
/Exercising leadership and teamwork (21)		
	leadership, handling dilemmas teambuilding, working with diverse teammates, acting as a team player	6 (28.6)
	communication (general)	15 (71.0)
/Communicating effectively (16)	active listening, empathy, patience	7 (34.1)
	conflict management	7 (34.1)
		2 (12.5)
Growth in personal and professional identity (31)		
/Self-awareness	self-awareness, self-motivation, confidence	9 (29.0)
/Self-discipline	time management, stress management, adapting to travel demands	14 (45.2)
/Professional identity	professionalism, networking	8 (25.8)
Improvements and other comments (18)		
/Improvements	increased training, mentoring, supervision; mentor project	8 (44.4)
/Positive comments	general comments on program experience, staff support, usefulness; mentor project	10 (55.6)
2: What internship challenges promoted growth and how were you prepared?		
Growth in personal and professional identity (24)		
/Self-awareness	self-awareness, confidence	5 (21.7)
/Self-discipline	time management, stress management, travel management	11 (47.8)
/Professionalism	professionalism, professional network	8 (34.8)
Growth in workforce/ professional competencies (25)		
/Exercising leadership and teamwork (12)	peer leadership, differences over work ethic, personality and work style conflicts	12 (100.0)
/Programming skills (7)	planning, adapting curricula, public speaking, behavior management, experience working with youth	7 (100.0)
/Adapting thinking and behavior (6)	adaptability, flexibility, resilience	6 (100.0)
/Communicating effectively (3)	active listening, conflict management with youth under stress	3 (100.0)
Improvements and other comments (16) /Improvements (8)	increased training or support related to time management, facilitation, conflict between peers	5 (62.5)
	increased supervision, fairness and transparency in selecting team leaders	3 (37.5)
/Positive comments (8)	training and support of leaders, positive feelings about experience, mentor project, career readiness	8 (100.0)
3: How has the internship influenced your career and education decisions?		
Impact on career direction and readiness (35)		
/Career decisions	influenced career field or job, changed career direction(intention to work with youth [12], military [5]	28 (77.8)
/Readiness for work	career readiness	8 (22.2)
Growth in workforce/professional competencies (10)		
/Programming skills (8)	curricula, planning, behavior management	8 (100.0)
/Leadership skills (2)	leadership	2 (100.0)
Personal growth and professionalism (8)	confidence, managing travel, time management, networking	8 (100.0)
Improvements and other comments (15)		
/Improvements (1)	mentor project	1 (100.0)
/Positive comments (14)	mentor project	4 (28.6)
	making a difference with youth, military	10 (71.4)
4: How can the internship be improved?		
Improvements and other comments (39)		
/Knowledge training (8)	more training on youth development, diversity, cultural competence, composing a federal resume	8 (44.4)
/Skills training (10)	more on teambuilding, stress management; advanced training for returning interns	4 (22.2)
	more time, options, support on mentor project	6 (44.4)
/Change policies and practices (13)	logistics of training, increased intern roles in training, expanded opportunities for leadership	9 (69.2)
	more diversity in backgrounds of interns	2 (15.4)
	reduce staff favoritism, unfair leader selection process	2 (15.4)
/Positive comments (8)	general comments on program experience, desire to volunteer, expand program abroad	8 (100.0)

Note: *Adaptability typically named without describing context. In context, adaptations include travel adjustments and adjustments to audiences and conditions during program implementation. Adapting curricula included with programming.

the transferability of the critical reflection model, as discussed further below. Comments focus on a slightly smaller range of skills but highlight their usefulness in diverse personal as well as professional contexts as an integrated and adaptive skill-set for creative programming (Walker & Walker, 2012), responsive relationships (Akiva et al., 2017),

and nuanced problem-solving (Larson & Walker, 2010). Comments also identify confidence, professionalism, and career readiness benefits not included in fixed-choice items. Moreover, personal and relational challenges of implementing programs with diverse collaborators under changing conditions—enhanced by peer, staff, and mentor

support—facilitated “real-world” perspectives and practices reported as beneficial in internships (Velez & Giner, 2015). Comments about peer supports and challenges suggest that collaborative teamwork serving targeted audiences may amplify program benefits previously reported for cohorts of independent practitioners (Garst et al., 2019; Shanahan & Shehan, 2020).

Although respondents were not asked to compare sources of current competence, positive views of internship benefits suggest that intensive practice experiences are at least complementary to academic training (Baizerman et al., 2013; Garst et al., 2019; Shockley & Thompson, 2012) and may be more critical than coursework for career decisions and performance. Results reiterate the importance of 21st century (Burrus et al., 2013; Young, 2018) or social-emotional (Newman, 2020) skills such as communication, time and stress management, adaptive problem solving, teamwork and leadership.

Ratings of program effects did not include self-assessed level of performance, but it seems unlikely that interns would esteem internship T&E highly if they felt unprepared for internship or current work. Results of this study corroborate internship feedback on intern performance by trainers, team leaders, event hosts, youth participants, and interns themselves (Silliman et al., 2020). Finally, interns suggested few program improvements, rather requested more training on current topics, especially career development and cultural competence.

6.2. Relevance and recency of benefits

Alumni, compared to interns, were slightly more likely to rate competencies as important for current work, although differences were not statistically significant. The combined cohorts rated competencies about equally important for internship and current work, suggesting that most participants gain a wide range of benefits in their first year. Sustained engagement and leadership likely yield additional benefits, or fewer would serve beyond one year. Survey questions were probably not sensitive to such nuanced benefits. More alumni commented on the usefulness of professionalism and time management, and described current work applications, perhaps due to their maturity and career experience. Alumni were also more likely to comment on time management and interpersonal differences as challenges and to offer positive comments about program staff and climate, differences that may reflect cohort effects.

6.3. Most important competencies

T&E was important for performance of *all* competencies, including those that typically require intensive and collaborative practice (e.g., coping under pressure, working with people). Comments on useful strategies and learning from challenges emphasize three benefits often cited in internships (Velez & Giner, 2015):

- 1) competency growth, evident in capacities to plan, implement, and debrief youth programs and
- 2) communication with co-workers;
- 3) adaptation, evident in adjustments to program changes, differences and difficulties of teammates and youth, and personal growth challenges such as managing time and travel; and
- 4) supportive relationships, evident in staff and mentor coaching, peer collaboration, and energizing effects of positive feedback from youth. These experiences were instrumental in cultivating confidence, a sense of readiness for career work and leadership.

6.4. Program Improvements

Comments on program improvement focused primarily on increased training and mentoring, although a few remarks on feeling excluded, unsupported, or treated unfairly underline the importance of sensitivity to trainee experiences. Nevertheless, overwhelmingly positive ratings

and comments from all respondents and relative absence of negative critique is remarkable for such a complex and intensive experience at a critical developmental transition.

6.5. Mechanisms of change

Interns' initial mastery and continued use of competencies point to the relevance of experiential-reflective learning. Strengths-based (vs. problem-oriented) intensive training (vs. unstructured experience), focused on job-relevant knowledge and skills (vs. concepts or general skills), with sustained practice in real-time settings (vs. brief exposure in contrived settings), including teamwork and collaborative learning (vs. individual-focused) with constructive feedback (vs. instruction-only) by adult mentors and peers (vs. experience-without-reflection), and progressive leadership opportunities (vs. helper roles) are strategies for practice change and self-efficacy supported by earlier research in YW training (Akiva et al., 2017; Ash & Clayton, 2009; Garst et al., 2019; Robideau & Santi, 2020; Shanahan & Shehan, 2020) and internship (Velez & Giner, 2015). By contrast, limited training, experience, and support predicts higher stress and attrition (Hartje et al., 2008; White et al., 2020). These qualities were optimized by the quantity of training, approximately 250 hours annually, with nearly 60% of interns completing at least two years, and most serving as team leaders or peer trainers.

O*NET competencies and tools such as DEAL are practical behaviors that support PYD practice (Silliman et al., 2020; Newman, 2020) and problem solving (Larson & Walker, 2010), but transfer to a wide range of contexts (Burrus et al., 2013; Ash & Clayton, 2009). Technical and interpersonal challenges were stressful, but the balance of initiative and support enhanced capabilities, insights, and confidence.

6.6. Reflection and conclusions

Although competencies were distinguished conceptually, effective practice required their integration and adaptation to specific audiences and circumstances, as reflected in comments about event leadership and peer teamwork. Although levels of performance were not specified on the survey, and such distinctions entail some subjective and situational variation, both minimal and optimal standards were clarified in training and mentoring. Interns typically exceeded minimal standards when they began assisting with events and most achieved optimal standards for planning, leading, and evaluating youth events after a year. Most interns served two or more years and many served as mentors and team leaders. Based on ratings and comments, internship training standards seemed to be appropriate to interns' current work. Helping professions involve both art and science (Walker & Walker, 2012), and while training *dosage* may not be prescribed exactly, more than 250 hours of training and practice seems to have established a broad set of skills—applied to practice-and-reflection protocols—that were satisfactorily sustained and applied 1–6 years after the internship.

At the same time, many interns acknowledged the importance of taking responsibility for their own challenges (e.g., gaining perspective, mastering new skills, adjusting to change, dealing with failure or lack of control, balancing work, school, family, and travel). Notably missing in comments about challenges were complaints, blaming, or sarcasm. However, comments on challenges also noted peer differences in work ethic or behavioral style. Notably present, in words or in tone, was a respect and concern for the needs of military youth and families that put their own challenges in perspective.

6.7. Limitations

Although results are quite positive, study limitations suggest caution in generalizing to broader audiences. Interns were not randomly selected. Response rate was high, ratings and comments consistently positive. Thus, even if non-responders had offered negative

assessments, overall trends would likely be positive. Response numbers, together with positively skewed ratings, contributed to relatively low statistical power, as reflected in several non-significant tests. Non-response to demographic items precluded a precise calculation of interns currently employed, although that figure (including those in school *and* working) is at least half the sample.

Survey brevity likely enhanced response rate but limited the scope of questions. For instance, level of performance was not specified (e.g., Fox et al., 2013), although comments suggest that respondents sustained their trainers' high expectations into current work. Self-report data is arguably the most accurate source on the value of training, since recipients are commenting on their own experience, but may be vulnerable to acquiescence or social desirability bias. The survey was voluntary and provided opportunity for negative comments, yet recorded almost none, thus likely did not promote bias. The survey is a one-time measure, thus did not capture incremental changes. Pre/post/follow-up measures and/or independent observations might have provided a more nuanced description of training effects. Likewise, more extensive and/or in-depth evaluation of other training outcomes (e.g., youth development knowledge, planning or curriculum development skills) and current work experiences would more effectively "round out" program effects. Finally, more detail on mechanisms that influenced learning and application might better account for differences in competency development between groups or over time.

7. Implications and recommendations

The process and results of this study offer many implications for practice, research, and policy in preparation of youth workers and potentially for youth programs.

7.1. Practice and training

Study results provide implicit support for experiential-reflective strategies to improve YW competencies critical to the delivery of PYD programming. Focused on-site and online training and mentoring, together with practical experience over multiple years, locations, teams, roles, and conditions is an invaluable complement to academic coursework. Intensity, redundancy, and variety of internship T&E probably exceeded minimum needs of Project YES interns, but fostered mastery across individual differences, adaptive leadership in diverse settings, and sustained competence into professional careers. Cultivation of a learning community, including peer collaboration and mentoring, provides a valuable model for professional teamwork, leadership, and networking.

This approach entails significant investments by program staff, although shared leadership with intern team leaders increases program efficiency, and gives interns opportunities for leadership, and mentoring. Nevertheless, college students are capable and motivated learners who need both challenge and support to grow more confident and resilient before they transition into professional careers.

7.2. Evaluation and research

This study illustrates the value of framing evaluation in the context of a clear, research and practice-based T&E model. Mixed methods provided a rich picture of what competencies were useful and how they were learned and applied. At the same time, results commend more systematic documentation of competency levels, intern growth, and user feedback to track progress across the internship experience. Further investigation of program conditions, including intensity (hours and demands of training and experience), depth and breadth (competencies and roles mastered), frequency and duration of service would provide more precise indicators of the training dosage needed to promote program benefits. Likewise, further research should examine effects of broader strategies such as blended training (online and face-to-

face) or specific mechanisms such as critical reflection that facilitate acquisition and application of competencies during internship and into helping careers might enhance understanding of the process and program improvement. Special attention might be given to contributions and benefits of peer leadership and program processes (e.g., management, training, program implementation and adaptation, evaluation) in this regard. Finally, more research is needed on the effects of internships on program participants, organizations, and communities.

7.3. Policy and Procedures

Several elements of program context enhanced evaluation feasibility, cost-effectiveness, and participation. These included continuity of program goals, funding, practice, leadership, and contact with alumni as well as organizational infrastructure (e.g., availability of online data collection and analysis tools, fiscal management, evaluation budget). Future research might examine whether and how this model is scalable or how specific elements might be adapted to other organizations and settings.

8. Summary

The Project YES internship featured intensive and extensive training including hands-on experience that facilitated readiness for leadership of youth events and served as a significant influence on career work up to six years after training. Interns' comments on open-ended questions emphasized the usefulness of training, especially for communication skills and adaptability to change. Interns reported that relational and personal challenges during internship served to build strengths. Overall, interns were vastly more complimentary than critical, but did suggest greater focus on learning about careers in helping professions, youth development, cultural competency, stress management. Results extend findings of intern exit surveys as well as prior research on youth worker competencies, and efficacy of job-focused, hands-on training. Recommendations include refinement and integration of programming and evaluation processes and development of new tools. More in-depth research is needed on the components and mechanisms of competency mastery and application, as well as transition, impact, and retention in careers.

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

Benjamin Silliman: Conceptualization, Methodology, Software, Validation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Resources, Data curation, Writing - original draft and revision, Writing - review & editing, Visualization, Supervision, Project administration. **Harriett C. Edwards:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - review & editing, Visualization, Supervision, Project administration, Funding acquisition. **James C. Johnson:** Conceptualization, Resources, Writing - review & editing, Visualization, Supervision, Project administration, Funding acquisition.

Declaration of Competing Interest

Dr. Benjamin Silliman – evaluator, human subjects coordinator, and principal writer – no conflict of interest. **Dr. Harriett C. Edwards** – serves as the lead principal investigator of Project Youth Extension Service (YES). **Dr. JC Johnson** – serves as the co-principal investigator

and national director of Project YES. Dr. Edwards and Dr. Johnson secured the funding necessary for program evaluation research to be conducted and were responsible for project administration and supervision tasks. They collaborated with the evaluation to intentionally clarify the focus and effectiveness of the study while avoiding other potential conflicts of interest. These efforts included establishing the scope of program evaluation and research as well as the expected outputs: comprehensive findings, reports, and potential publications. Dr. Edwards and Dr. Johnson were not involved in the data collection process (engagement with respondents, data analysis, etc.). They did provide general program descriptions and historical information regarding program design and processes. They also participated in final review, editing, and preparation for submission.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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