



# Transcend the Summer Slump

How Summer Programs Can Attract and Retain Low-Income High School Students

**Denise Jones and Dennis Jones**

Summer learning loss, the phenomenon in which young people lose academic skills over the summer, disproportionately affects low-income students (Afterschool Alliance, 2010; Miller, 2007; National Summer Learning Association, 2009; Wallace Foundation, 2010). High-quality summer learning programs are an important mechanism to help low-income students overcome persistent opportunity gaps so they can improve their academic outcomes, high school completion rates, and access to employment.

However, low-income youth participate in summer learning programs at lower rates than more affluent students (Deschenes et al., 2010). Research

has elucidated why low-income students do *not* engage in summer learning programs, but few scholars have examined why young people *do* engage; even fewer have studied high school students.

We therefore undertook research on why low-income high school students invest in summer learning. We engaged participants in a community-based summer learning program to examine the factors that first attracted and then sustained their participation. We found that the elements that attracted students to the program were not the same as those that sustained participation. The results of our study suggest ways that program providers and policy makers can better serve the young people who need summer learning programs most.

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## Summer Learning and Low-Income High School Youth

Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson (2007) suggest that, by the end of fifth grade, disadvantaged youth may be nearly three grade levels behind more affluent students. In a study of over half a million students in grades 2–9 in one southern U.S. state, Atteberry and McEachin (2016) found that, during the summer, students lost 25 to 30 percent of material learned in the previous year, with more pronounced learning loss occurring among students of low socioeconomic status.

By the beginning of high school, then, low-income students typically have accumulated a significant learning deficit. The difference goes beyond the well-established achievement gap between lower- and higher-income groups to include lower high school persistence rates, limited job access and workforce preparedness, and limited pursuit of postsecondary education, among others (Alexander et al., 2007). All of these effects further exacerbate inequities and sustain the cycle of poverty.

Much of the existing literature suggests that high-quality summer learning programs are an important strategy to mitigate summer learning loss and to attenuate pervasive opportunity and achievement gaps between low-income and higher-income students (McLaughlin & Smink, 2009; National Summer Learning Association, 2014, 2016; Terzian, Moore, & Hamilton, 2009; Wallace Foundation, 2010). Although some evidence suggests that summer programs have the greatest impact in the early grade levels (Alexander et al., 2007; Cooper, Charlton, Valentine, & Muhlenbruck, 2000; Miller, 2007), older youth may benefit from tailored programs that target character and interpersonal skill development and exposure to role models, in addition to academic achievement (Deschenes et al., 2010; McLaughlin & Smink, 2009; Terzian et al., 2009). Summer learning programs have the potential to increase high school students' academic achievement, advance their psychosocial development, improve their school persistence rates, enhance their motivation for and engagement in learning, and expose them to diverse enrichment opportunities (Cooper et al., 2000;

Fredericks & Eccles, 2006; Hall, Israel, & Shortt, 2004; Hansen, Larsen, & Dworkin, 2003; Pearce & Larson, 2006; Raley, Grossman, & Walker, 2005).

Despite these benefits, participation in summer learning programs declines with age, and participation rates are lower for low-income students than for higher-income youth (Deschenes et al., 2010). High school students have different needs from those of younger children, including socializing with peers, helping with family responsibilities, and working to help support the household (Deschenes et al., 2010; Lauver, Little, & Weiss, 2004). Summer learning programs targeting high school students must take these factors into account rather than applying a one-size-fits-all approach. After all, summer programs can be effective in attenuating opportunity gaps only if low-income students choose to participate. Older youth are more likely to participate in programs that are tailored specifically to them and in which they are meaningfully involved (Walker, Marczak, Blyth, & Borden, 2005).

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### Research Questions

Our research sought to understand why low-income high school students invest in summer learning opportunities. We wanted to know how to build a high-quality, high-demand model that not only attracts participation but also sustains engagement over time. To that end, we worked with high school students from Youth Enrichment Services (YES), a community-based summer learning program in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to examine two questions:

1. What are the factors that attract and sustain low-income high school students' participation in the YES summer learning program?
2. How do the factors that attract compare to the factors that sustain low-income high school students' participation?

### Program Context

YES is a nonprofit organization in Pittsburgh for inner-city youth aged 14–21. Its mission is to give socially and economically disadvantaged youth the opportunity to achieve success through mentorship, enrichment,

and employment programming. Its afterschool and summer programs connect young people to meaningful early work experiences—from vocational trades and customer service opportunities to summer camp counseling and research assistantships. These experiences help youth build skills and gain work experience linked to career paths, future employment opportunities, and postsecondary education.

YES's eight-week summer program focuses on leadership development, employability preparation, and academic enrichment. The goal is not only to prepare youth for future employment, but to also stimulate their academic acumen and to deepen their commitment to their peers and communities. The program has two pathways: Summer Scholars, for young people with minimal work experience, and Advanced Summer Scholars, for older participants with previous work experience. Summer Scholars provides participants with work etiquette skills, experiential learning opportunities, peer development, and career exposure. Building on this foundation, Advanced Summer Scholars centers on deepening participants' technical skills, building their leadership capacity through external employment, and stimulating their intellectual curiosity through research. College-bound advanced scholars engage in college preparation coursework.

YES provided a suitable context for our research into the factors that attract and sustain participation because it has a 25-year history of providing high-quality summer programming for socially and economically disadvantaged high school students. At the time of our study, more than 40 percent of YES participants had been in the program for more than two years.

## Methodology

To create a holistic picture of high school students' engagement with YES summer programming, the program director collected and analyzed quantitative and qualitative data using survey and interview protocols designed for this study.

The results of a quantitative survey administered by the program director were used to understand factors that attract participants to the summer program. The 47 young people who completed this survey in summer 2018 are representative of the population of YES summer program participants.

Next, we conducted semi-structured interviews with returning participants at the end of summer 2018

to further gauge attraction and retention factors and to discover how students made sense of their experiences. The 11 interview respondents were a convenience sample of young people who had participated in YES for at least two summers and who indicated willingness when invited by the program director.

## Why Youth Participate in YES

We analyzed the quantitative and qualitative data to discover what factors attracted students to YES summer learning in the first place, what sustained their participation for more than one year, and how attraction factors compared to retention factors.

### Attraction Factors

The responses to survey and interview questions about why high school participants first came to the YES summer learning program generally fell into five categories:

1. Economic opportunity
2. Employability preparation
3. Relationship building
4. Academic learning
5. Leadership training

### Economic Opportunity

Nearly 80 percent of survey respondents and two of the 11 interviewees indicated that economic opportunity was a feature that attracted them to the program. One interviewee said, "The money was the first factor that allured me to join the program. As soon as I was 14, I enrolled in YES. I wanted to earn money so that I didn't have to rely on my mom's income." This respondent saw earning money as a way to gain independence.

### Employability Preparation

About half of survey respondents pointed to employability preparation as an attraction factor, as did five of the 11 interview respondents. One female respondent made her reason for participating clear: "I would definitely say work experience—that's basically what attracted me."

### Relationship Building

Relationship building was cited as an attraction factor by 80 percent of survey respondents and by five of the 11 interviewees. All interviewees said that building relationships outside of their typical friend groups was a central element of their personal development. They also pointed to the benefits of having peer role models

whose trajectories aligned with their own goals.

### **Academic Learning**

Three of the 11 interviewees and 60 percent of survey respondents cited the importance of academic learning. One participant explained in his interview:

I don't want to just be working for the money. I want to work to actually learn something along the way. I was thinking to myself, "I would rather learn and get paid for it and learn something through that work and educational experience than [to] just work and learn nothing at all." So when YES spoke about the opportunity to learn and earn money, that really pulled me in.

This interviewee explicitly connected academic learning with economic opportunity: "[They] go hand and hand with each other because ... you need education to ... gain economic mobility."

A female participant accentuated the opportunity to explore as an attractive program factor: "You get to have new experiences that you wouldn't get to have on a regular day." Another female respondent agreed: "I was attracted to YES because it was kind of a way to get away from stuff and to engage yourself in exploring and learning new things.... This was really important to me."

### **Leadership Training**

Three of the 11 participants interviewed described the opportunity to develop leadership skills as a factor that piqued their interest in participating in YES. One interviewee reflected on his passion for serving as a mentor to younger program participants:

I really got involved with YES because it was good seeing ... me [as] a role model for most kids. Me being there, just being around for the kids. I showed a lot of kids that I was willing to work with them and to help them get where they need to be.

This response highlights this participant's personal responsibility to his YES community members. Peer mentoring is central to the YES philosophy.

### **Factors Sustaining Student Participation**

We asked the 11 interviewees, all of whom had participated in YES summer programming for at

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least two years, what kept them coming back to the program. The survey also asked about retention factors. Respondents cited the following factors:

1. Academic learning
2. Relationship building
3. Leadership training
4. Employability preparation

### **Academic Learning**

Eight of the 11 interviewees and 60 percent of survey respondents cited academic learning and exploration as factors that sustained their participation in YES. For example, one respondent said:

I come back to YES because they always provide me with the opportunity to try new things. Every year, there's something different about it that pulls my attention ... and through these learning experiences, they force you to see a different view of the world.

Another interviewee clearly connected learning with retention:

Every time I don't feel like ... coming back another year, I always remind myself, "You can really learn something new if you come back." ... And I give myself a pep talk: "You can't give up on gaining new knowledge."

A respondent described the programmatic elements that supported her exploration:

We engage in diverse work sites, experience hands-on learning opportunities, engage in new situations with people daily ... and get to explore classes that help us conduct research for our projects ... like African American history, performing arts, and law enforcement.

The idea of self-accountability was threaded throughout the interviews. Students said they encouraged themselves to remain invested so they could continue to reap the benefits of engagement. For example, an interviewee noted, "I come back because I feel like I need to learn something new. Even though I have been coming for two years, there's always something more to know and more to learn. So, that's why I keep coming back." Many students expressed similar views; they wanted to maintain and deepen the hard-earned gains they had made.

Another interviewee mentioned her desire to be challenged: “With school, nothing’s really challenging me—but through YES, I am always challenged academically.... So I decided I’d challenged myself by continuously engaging in learning for the sake of learning ... and I’m still tackling this head on.”

### Relationship Building

Eight interviewees and over half of survey respondents suggested that YES’s family-like atmosphere fostered a sense of belonging that sustained their investment in the program. For example, one interviewee said, “I keep coming back because, to me, we’re all like one big family.” Another echoed this sentiment: “I feel like not only did I make friends, but I made family. [YES] became a family thing.” Yet another, a three-year participant, agreed:

YES [is] basically home, and everyone’s just family around here. Everyone knows the number one thing with me, as far as I’m concerned in my life, is family. And because I consider YES my family ... it just seemed normal for me to come back every summer.

In addition to peer relationships, respondents said that relationships with staff also played a vital role in their return to the summer program. One respondent noted that a personal invitation from the executive director was central in her decision to come back. She also said that staying in contact with staff members during the school year kept the program on her mind so that she wanted to return. Similarly, another interviewee said that what brought her back was “the overall staff.... They care about you, what you’re doing in life, and whether you’re comfortable in the program ... and if you’re not, they’ll try to make changes so that you are.”

### Leadership Training

Five interviewees said that their ongoing investment in YES was related to a sense of giving back to the community and to their ability to mentor younger

participants. One interviewee expressed this desire this way: “I wanted to continue to help people understand themselves and to really get close to people so that we can work together to understand what they are going through.” Some interviewees expressed a sense of obligation to their younger peers. For example, one said, “I come back so that I can help make [my mentee’s] situation be better ... even better than mine.”

### Employability Preparation

The transferability of skills to real life and the workplace sustained many YES students. One respondent affirmed this notion:

YES has provided me with many skills—both academic and non-academic—that I’ve already applied through my current school year and with experiences I found necessary and extremely useful.

Respondents reported that their summer employment prepared them for future opportunities within YES and in other careers. They felt that their exposure to work expectations and etiquette helped them navigate employment successfully and gave them a toolbox of skills for future work.

### Comparison of Attracting and Sustaining Factors

Research Question 2 examines how attracting and sustaining factors compare. The results from survey and interview responses are summarized in Table 1.

Four of the five factors that attracted survey and interview respondents to the YES summer program also appear in the list of sustaining factors. However, the top attracting factor, economic opportunity, does not make the sustaining list at all. Less than 10 percent of survey respondents chose economic opportunity as a sustaining factor, compared to 80 percent who said that the opportunity to earn money was an attracting element. Only one interviewee mentioned economic opportunity as a sustaining factor.

**Table 1. Comparison of Attracting and Sustaining Factors**

Attracting Factors	Sustaining Factors
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Economic opportunity</li> <li>2. Employability preparation</li> <li>3. Relationship building</li> <li>4. Academic learning</li> <li>5. Leadership training</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Academic learning</li> <li>2. Relationship building</li> <li>3. Leadership training</li> <li>4. Employability preparation</li> </ol>



Similarly, the employability preparation provided by work experience was cited by about 50 percent of survey respondents as an attracting factor and by only three interviewees as a sustaining factor.

The attracting factors basically are forms of capital: financial, human, and social. Though YES participants seem to have been drawn by the immediate utility of these forms of capital, these external motivations do not alone seem to be enough to sustain students' investment in the program.

The sustaining factors, by contrast, are more intrinsic. The way interviewees described academic learning, for example, went beyond cursory motivations such as good grades or post-graduation prospects to focus on the benefits of learning, of accountability, and of challenging oneself. Similarly, the way students described relationships in the program—defining participants and staff as *family*—moves beyond the possibly more superficial level of friendship that may have attracted students in the first place.

## Recommendations

This study collected a rich set of perspectives on the factors that attracted low-income high school students to a summer learning program and then sustained their participation. However, the sample size was modest and limited to one program. Some of the findings may be specific to YES. Nevertheless, our results suggest approaches that summer learning programs can take to attract and sustain the participation of low-income high school youth. Because student motivations differ, successful models will be multifaceted and holistic, incorporating a variety of offerings to engage young people's interests.

### Recommendations to Attract Participants

The YES experience suggests two strategies programs can use to attract participants.

#### Offer Paid Work Experience

Summer programs for high school students are competing with opportunities to earn money. It is not surprising that the economic opportunity provided by YES's stipended work experience and the related employabil-

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ity training were the top two reasons respondents said they were attracted to the program.

To offer paid work experience, programs can form partnerships with workforce development agencies. YES has a partnership with Partner4Work, the fiduciary body that provides a reimbursement grant for participant salaries. Summer learning work programs must offer in-depth

training and high-level, in-demand skills rather than providing low-skill opportunities.

#### Highlight Social Component

YES respondents said they were attracted to opportunities for relationship building. They talked about the importance of being surrounded by individuals who share similar life goals. They also mentioned that they lack spaces for positive peer interactions and are underexposed to positive examples. To capitalize on these interests, summer programs can highlight the social components of programming in their recruitment efforts.

One way to highlight social interactions is to conduct peer-to-peer recruitment. Such a model takes advantage of the fact that high school youth rely on peer relationships. Besides recruiting students, peers can also stay connected to "their" recruits during the school year to prime them for participation next summer.

#### Recommendations to Sustain Participation

Our findings suggest three strategies summer programs can use to sustain participation beyond the first year.

#### Create a Family Atmosphere

A sense of belonging is one of the most important human needs (Huit, 2007). Many survey and interview respondents indicated that their investment in YES came from a sense of belonging fostered by a welcoming, family-like atmosphere.

Summer programs seeking to recruit and retain high school students should embody a similar atmosphere. They can encourage participants to build relationships with both peers and staff. YES staff make participants feel valued by supporting them in their life situations and their choices. Giving participants input into program visions and norms demonstrates respect for their perspectives.

## Facilitate Growth, Work, and Reflection

Survey and interview respondents cited growth opportunities as a reason for their continued investment in YES. They described growth in academics, social and emotional wellness, and leadership capacity. They also talked about having refined their identities and their ability to hold themselves accountable for continuous learning.

Summer learning programs can sustain interest by creating opportunities for participants to explore ideas, careers, personally meaningful issues, and diverse perspectives. Giving students meaningful work and engaging them in the organization's vision also encourage persistence in the program. Participants should create their own goals so they develop self-accountability; they should also have opportunities to reflect on their progress so they see how both their self-efficacy and their role in the program are evolving.

## Engage Participants in Their Communities

After participating in YES for consecutive years, participants expressed a desire to give back to the program. Summer programs can leverage this interest by creating spaces, such as surveys or small-group discussions, in which participants can provide feedback about program strengths and areas for improvement.

Programs can also foster participants' commitment to their communities and their peers by encouraging them to investigate challenges in their communities. They can support participants in learning how to conduct research. As participants study community issues and develop research skills, they are likely to gravitate toward solving the community issues they identify. In the process, they can begin to see themselves as valuable assets in their communities. Having opportunities to give back keeps participants engaged as they work on issues that are personally meaningful to them.

## Improving Participation in Summer Programs

These recommendations are beginning steps toward removing barriers and improving the participation of low-income high school students in summer learning programs. The vital role of summer learning programs in improving academic achievement, sociocultural awareness, and preparation for life beyond high school make it critical that summer programs invest

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in recruiting and retaining low-income students.

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