

Recognizing their Potential, Summer and Beyond:
Investigating a Summer Programming for Rural Youths.
Grafton County, New Hampshire

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Proposal for
Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship
University of New Hampshire
Durham, New Hampshire

History and Definition

Over the past six years the Plymouth-Area Ad Hoc Committee on Youth at Risk, a group of concerned citizens in Grafton County of New Hampshire, has mobilized to improve the socioeconomic well-being of families in the 17 rural towns in the County. With this as their goal, these community leaders recently received a \$1 million dollar Federal Community Development Block Grant to build the Whole Village Family Resource Center in Plymouth, New Hampshire. Over a dozen social services, including Head Start, a teen oriented Family Services Council, and Family Planning, will work out of the Center. One of the aims of the Center will be to “intervene at early stages of family life so that children will grow into productive citizens”(Newsom B., 1995). Their plan is to combat social problems, like unemployment, unplanned pregnancy, alcoholism and drug abuse, with effective early intervention so that young people can be successful adults in their work, families, and community, formed in mid-1989, now has nearly 100 concerned members, professionals and citizens, who are working to end these problems that face young people. The design of the Whole Village Center will facilitate collaboration between the agencies so they can work together to identify where there are gaps and overlaps in the services they provide.

The Center aims to help both families and individuals. The research proposed here focuses on high school students. I will identify the issues and problems facing them with the goal of designing a summer program that can meet their needs for a more successful transition to adulthood. Such a youth program would work towards one of the key goals of the Committee: raising children to become productive citizens.

There is extensive social and psychological research on children and the processes of socialization that create who each individual becomes. Concern about the well-being of youth, especially the “forgotten half” who do not plan to go to college, has been growing in recent years (National Center on Education and the Economy). Advocacy organizations such as the Children's Defense Fund have conducted investigations into social programs assessing what is effective in resolving many of the issues I will be examining in the Plymouth area. I have included a bibliography of some of the resources that will be useful in the study. Another vital resource will be the citizens and professionals involved in the

creation of the Whole Village Family Resource Center. Teachers, youth workers, guidance counselors, and police officers in the towns of Grafton County will also be important contacts. Their experience will guide the design of the research and help me target the most pressing issues. I will also seek information from young people themselves. Finally, I will review summer programs that already operate in the area identifying gaps and opportunities for young people.

The research will consist of two phases. Initially, I will identify what the students do during the summer and what they would like to do. This includes the limits they set for themselves in making their summer plans, or in the lack of plans they make. Secondly, I will investigate what the area can offer young people in the summer months and what other communities offer. These two objectives follow the hypothesis that there is a relationship between how young people spend their summers and what they do after high school, both short term and long term. Once the research is compiled I will propose a plan for a Summer Program for High School youth, including an outline of potential funding possibilities to implement the program for the summer of 1996.

Methodology

To address the two parts of the research I will use three methods of collecting data: questionnaires, interviews (by phone and face-to-face), and secondary data.

The questionnaires will be distributed to juniors and seniors in Plymouth area high schools. The goal of the questionnaire is two fold. First, I will be collecting baseline data, which the center can use to evaluate its impact on youth in future years. Second, I will be collecting information to help me and Center leaders assess the characteristics, skills, and needs of Plymouth area youth so that we can design an appropriate summer program. I would seek to identify what they do in the summer, what factors prevent them from doing what they would like to do, and what would enhance their opportunities to use their summer months to build for the future.

Kelly Myers, Director of the Survey Center at the University of New Hampshire, who has experience surveying, writing, and administering questionnaires to high school students, has agreed to assist me in writing the questionnaire and in finding the best method to administer it. In 1990 there were 1,465 students between 16-19 years of age in the area around Plymouth. Barbara Newsom, Secretary of

the Board of Directors of the Whole Village Family Resource Center, will be a useful contact in administering the questionnaires. Barbara Newsom and others involved with the Center are enthusiastic about this research and will furnish a letter of support if requested.

Statistics with Stata will be used to analyze the data collected from the questionnaires. This is the program that is taught in Sociology Statistics courses (SOC 502) and I have also used it working for Dr. Lawrence Hamilton) the author of several books using the program. It is a straightforward program and I feel comfortable using it and asking for Dr. Hamilton's guidance if necessary.

I will also conduct open-ended, semi-structured interviews with professionals from education and social welfare programs to gather information and insight to help design the summer program. The interviews with people who have both positive and negative interaction with young people, such as guidance counselors, teachers, and police officers, will aid in assessing what young people needs are and what their opportunities and problems are in the community. The interview data will be combined with analysis of the survey data.

Secondary data from the Census and various state and local sources will be used to identify the most important issues and problems facing the community and young people. I will organize the data in such a manner that the Resource Center can use it to measure the change over the next three to five years it is in operation. Barbara Newsom took part in collecting data for a Needs Assessment Survey in 1989 for the Ad Hoc Committee. Her experience and knowledge of reliable sources will serve as another asset. My advisor, Cynthia Duncan has community development experience and has worked with Barbara and Jack Newsom and other North Country leaders to produce Young Families and Youth in the North Country, and she will offer overall guidance on the design, analysis, and practical application of the research findings.

Significance

Doing this research would give me first hand experience in the fields of sociological research and community development. It would give the people of Grafton County and the agencies that will work out of the Whole Village Community Resource Center organized data and another resource for improving the socioeconomic status of the region.

This opportunity would help me to decide if community development is a field I will succeed in and enjoy, and help me to narrow my focus on a field of study for graduate school. Working in a community I

am not directly a part of would be a challenging experience, help me combine my sociological training and commitment to community development, and learn to cope with obstacles and take advantage of opportunities.

The concern that there is nothing for kids in rural communities to do has long preoccupied leaders in rural areas. Many people believe that children in rural towns are sheltered from drugs, unplanned pregnancy, and violence. However, research on rural poverty and rural communities shows that these problems do not disappear with decreasing population density; they are not isolated to urban areas (Duncan, 1992; Fitchen, 1991; Rural Sociological Taskforce, 1993; Children's Defense Fund, 1992). If there is a link between social problems, such as those previously mentioned, how teenagers spend their summers, and what they choose to do after high school, then we must identify the relationships and understand how they function.

Outcome

My final report would present the results in two forms: (1) an action proposal for a summer program and (2) a statement of the status of young people in Grafton County.

The proposal would outline a plan for a summer program for young people. This may take the form of a handbook, proposed daily or weekly activities, and field trips. When choosing the activities or topics for a handbook important consideration would be taken of the students' interests. Possibilities include career exploration, athletics, theatre, museums, weekend trips, and community service opportunities. Many existing programs adopt the model of the Civilian Conservation Corps, and these might be relevant here in New Hampshire's North Country.

The statement of the status of young people will serve as a baseline research that can be replicated in the future. This data collection would allow agencies at the Center to see the impact their services have made and to identify where work still needs to be done.

Location

The bulk of the work performed will be in the Plymouth area. Living in the Plymouth area for the summer would ease the difficulties of driving between Durham and Plymouth too much. I will interview people in Grafton County and distribute the questionnaires at area high schools surrounding Plymouth. There are a number of individuals in the area that will be helpful in the data collection. Barbara and Jack

Newsom have been vital in the progress the Ad Hoc Committee has made thus far. There are also several citizen activists and professionals who will be vital in collecting data that I will have access to via the Newsoms.

Research will be collected in Durham at the U.N.H. campus also and I will work with Dr. Cynthia Duncan throughout the nine weeks. She will advise me on literature to be reviewed and possible contacts, both in the Plymouth area and investigating established summer programs elsewhere. We will meet several times a month to assess my progress and address any problems I may have doing the research.

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Youth Policy Journal

Timetable

June 5-16: Questionnaires: distribute to and collect from area high school

Juniors and Seniors.

Literature Reviews: read works listed in bibliography, as well as other readings.

June 17-23: Analysis: analyze questionnaires by computer.

June 24-July 12: Interviews: guidance counselors, teachers, youth workers, police officers, community activists.

July 13-25: Interviews and Site Visits: investigate summer programs in the area and elsewhere.

July 26- August 6: Conclusions: summarize findings, write proposal and status assessment of youths, investigate funds for summer program.