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Motivating Youth on Probation to Post-Secondary Success

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Collaborative Health and Human Services

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Author Note

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Abstract

The Silver Star Youth Program at Rancho Cielo Youth Campus works with at-risk youth ages 15 ½ to 18 to help them achieve a high school diploma. Unfortunately, many Silver Star participants lack the motivation to graduate high school and continue on to higher education or to pursue good jobs. Of the 25 students surveyed, 25% stated having some knowledge about college and future plans after graduation. The remaining 75% of students were unsure or undecided on their plans. This capstone project was designed to motivate these at-risk youth to post-secondary success. Two intern-led workshops provided students with information about higher education and alternative paths post-graduation. Some recommendations for the agency and future interns include trying to incorporate a career day to provide students with different perspectives from different professionals. As well, building relationships with students and staff, and most importantly to not being afraid to step out of their comfort zone.

Key words: at-risk, higher education, youth, motivation, graduation

Problem

At-risk youth are underlooked and stereotyped most of the time as “delinquents,” “bad/trouble kids,” but that is the way society makes them out to look when they have been involved with the criminal justice system. There are many factors that contribute to a youth’s education and growth. However, when they are referred to a facility it is not as easy to get them on track educational wise. For instance, The Silver Star Program has low graduation rates for youth on probation. The graduation rate is currently 44.3%, which is not even half. Therefore, helping those students who are soon to graduate think about what comes after graduation is important to help them stimulate positive influence into helping them pursue a career or obtaining a good job. However, their lack of motivation is the big factor here. Students fear the outside world in the sense that they are not sure what is out there for them, or are unsure of what they want to do. Thus, leading them to dread the time for them to graduate.

Agency and Communities served

Rancho Cielo Youth Campus is a non-profit organization located in the outskirts of Salinas, California. They serve communities from Gonzales, Soledad, Greenfield, Castroville, King City, Salinas, and Seaside. Their mission is to “empower students to become responsible, accountable, competent, and productive citizens through education, job training, and individualized counseling.” They offer a variety of programs which include Agriculture, Construction, Automotive, Transitional Housing, and the Silver Star program. Rancho Cielo is quite diverse with a student population, but it is predominantly Hispanic students. Some of the organizations they are partnered with are Monterey County Probation Department, Global Majority, Families in Control, Monterey County Behavioral Health, Victim Offender Reconciliation, and Community Human Services.

My internship was directly with the Silver Star Youth Program. Where the majority of students are males, 65% males and 35% females. However, gender ratio isn't one of the barriers for them to encourage students to be motivated to pursue higher education, or encourage them to find a work passion. Students in the Silver Star Program are at an academic disadvantage and lack motivation. This affects the program's because its purpose is to get students to obtain their high school diploma. Thus, leading to affecting the community because the Silver Star Program works with youth who have been or are currently involved in the criminal justice system. Therefore, if students don't graduate it could possibly lead them to be out in the streets and continue onto the wrong path. This doesn't just affect the agency and community, but the main affected are the students themselves, because they will encounter major difficulties and disparities when they're out in the community.

Contributing Factors

There are factors that contribute to having low graduation rates and the students' lack of motivation to graduate. For instance in the program, there are only 2 teachers who teach all grade levels and all subjects for all students in the program. As we know, teachers play an important role in students' lives, as students spend most of their time at school. When students believe their teachers know and care for them as individuals, they are more willing to take risks and make mistakes and to see these mistakes not as failures but as opportunities to learn (TeachBeyond, 2022). The lack of teachers sets a barrier because students aren't given the attention they require depending on their level of academic achievement. These findings align with previous research linking teacher-student relationships with school engagement and support the need for continued research on the importance of teacher-student relationships among adolescents who are at-risk of

Running Head: MOTIVATING YOUTH ON PROBATION TO POST-SECONDARY SUCCESS
experiencing difficulties in school (Pham, Murray, and Gau, 2021). Therefore, students don't feel like they are being given the proper engagement on behalf of the teachers.

Another factor is the lack of motivation seniors have towards graduating, in a sense that seniors drag the outcome of graduating in fear of going out into the real world. Research has shown that at-risk youth continue to have difficulty managing police trust, hiring problems, and community engagement (Moffatt, 2015). Students seem to think they aren't capable of achieving or obtaining a good profession or occupation because of their backgrounds. Therefore, they feel unmotivated to even try. They know that once they graduate, they will have to be independent, which creates fear in them of not making it out there. The Silver Star program helps guide students in meeting their graduation credits, however, it is also up to the students to actually do the work. Parents also contribute to the students' motivation. According to America's Promise Alliance, "When parents experience similar adversity, or a young person's parents did not graduate from high school, a young person's opportunity to thrive is diminished further."

A third factor is the academic achievement level of the students. Many, if not most, students who enter residential juvenile justice facilities have an academic achievement level that is below the grade equivalent for their age, which puts them at a disadvantage. Students have the academic potential, but there are other factors that can contribute to their academic success. For instance, at the Silver Star program 87.3% of students are socioeconomically disadvantaged, and 24.6% are English learners. Which also plays a role, because it means many of these students don't have that educational support at home, or are still learning to overcome the language barrier. Aside from the fact that some of the students require specific attention depending on their learning skills. Also, the majority of the students in the program are Hispanic so, their families may not have the resources or education level to help them educationally.

Consequences

There are consequences to the factors of low graduation rates and students' motivation to graduating that can affect the students in the long run. Graduating high school nowadays and obtaining a diploma is the bare minimum to be able to obtain a decent job. For at-risk youth it can be slightly more difficult considering they have a record and an academic disadvantage, therefore job opportunities can be limited. Most jobs do background checks, and it can become an obstacle for them to obtain a job. Without opportunities to build the right skills, millions of youth will struggle to find jobs and risk being left behind, which can affect society as a whole.

Another consequence is financial hardship. If students are not able to obtain a job/career where they can support themselves, they'll experience financial hardship. According to the America's Promise Alliance, "Ten percent of youth – about 4 million young people – in the United States experience three or more adverse life experiences; including economic hardship, domestic or neighborhood violence, and parental incarceration – add up, young people are substantially less likely to complete high school, go to college, and have a stable job." Which goes to show that along with financial instability, they may deal with other issues. In today's society, everything has become insalely expensive, so the possibilities for them to encounter financial struggles may be higher. Thus, it can even lead them to even experience homelessness through their adolescent age.

Aside from possible future struggles, they could exceed high school graduation, which would mean they would proceed onto adult school. In which is a whole other system, compared to Rancho Cielo, where they help guide them to stay on track for graduation. Adult school is very different and independent. During this transition period, also known as "emerging adulthood", care leavers, like their peers in the general population, must make significant

decisions regarding many aspects of their adult life, including housing, employment, career and marriage (Arnett, 2000, Arnett, 2014). According to the Emerging Adulthood theory (Arnett, 2000), there are several features that are more pronounced during this period: young adults experience instability, feel in between adolescence and adulthood and are more self-focused. Rancho Cielo helps at-risk youth in preparing them for adulthood and what is to come next after graduation by providing programs and services to students and their families. However, it does come to the point where if a student exceeds the age in graduating within the program, they will have to be referred elsewhere. Which means it will be up to the student whether they continue their education or not. In which, it will be slightly more difficult for them to be motivated to even continue, and might end up dropping out.

Problem Model

CAUSES TO AGENCY PROBLEM	AGENCY SPECIFIC “MICRO LEVEL” PROBLEM	CONSEQUENCES TO AGENCY/STUDENTS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of teachers - Lack of motivation - Academic Achievement 	Low graduation rates at Rancho Cielo due to lack of motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of job opportunities - Financial Hardship - Exceeding age limit for high school graduation
	MACRO LEVEL	
	Youth will be out on the streets and youth violence can increase	

Project Description

My capstone project was focused on addressing the issue of the lack of motivation students have. From my time interning at the Silver Star program, students seem unmotivated to

think about what they want to do with their life after graduating. Therefore, I came up with my project which was two-intern led workshops that provided students with possible paths to think about pursuing after graduating. The students were presented with two different powerpoints; the first presentation was about community college and higher education. Providing them with information on possible community colleges throughout California, trade/vocational schools/programs. The second one was about optional paths in regards to jobs/careers that don't require higher education. Both presentations went into detail to motivate students into educating them that there are ways to succeed in life whether it be pursuing higher education or a job/career that doesn't require a diploma. As well as give them an incentive to think about what they will do after graduation, and for them to know there are options available to them.

Project Justification

The justification for this project is to provide my agency, Rancho Cielo Youth Campus, and the program, Silver Star, an idea to help out students and those graduating seniors that are soon to be out in the real world. To help them let students know that there are options and opportunities out there. In addition, teach students that there are no limits and they should strive for a bright future, regardless of how society perceives them. I would like for the agency and program to provide students with resources that allow them to gain insight into what the outside work and educational worlds are like.

My capstone project workshops were effective, students were given a post and pre surveys. The surveys would allow me to gather information on their backgrounds, knowledge of college, and help answer questions they had regarding college or life. These workshops served as a form of motivation to the students and encouraged them to think about what comes next and offer some resources.

Implementation Process

Before being able to implement my project, I had a whole process beforehand. From planning what the project was going to be, to completely going through with the project, and everything in between. My project implementation table will give an overview of when it all started and when each event took place. However, I do have to say it was time consuming, especially researching the adequate information to input in the powerpoints. The process itself consisted of providing students with pre and post surveys, presentations, and research.

The surveys consisted of seven questions in which students were asked about their ethnic background, knowledge of college, family background, and their plans for after graduating. I was able to present during class time in two different class periods. With the help of my mentors, I was able to successfully present. The students were engaging through it, and also participated in filling out the surveys.

Barriers to Service Delivery

The lack of funding and space to be able to hire more staff is a huge barrier to being able to provide the services students require. Funding disparities within the program could alter the opportunities for students to meet their academic potential. Along with the student's family background and knowledge of resources/education to be able to help guide them. Since most students come from Hispanic backgrounds, their families lack the educational level to be able to help them. As well as reaching out to resources available to them. Emerging adulthood is considered a risky and vulnerable period because it requires coping with complex instrumental and developmental tasks with little or no parental support, guidance, and monitoring (Arnett,

2000). These factors create barriers in the agency and program in being able to deliver their best services to the students. As well as the students being able to benefit from them.

Project Results

The results of the project were gathered through the surveys provided. From the pre-survey, I was able to obtain background information from students. All 25 students surveyed are from Hispanic background, and approximately 70% of them are first generation. Which was a term some students didn't know what it meant, so I had to explain what first-generation meant and ask if they were. The pre-survey also helped me know what the students thought about pursuing college, in which in the survey they were asked to answer on a scale of 1 to 5, how likely they were to attend college? More than 85% of the students answered a 2-3 on the scale, which meant they were unsure if college was in the books for them. Once both workshops had been completed, I gave them a post-survey. The post-surveys allowed me to know how many of them found the workshops helpful and insightful. Out of the 25 surveys received, 18 found the workshops helpful, 4 of them were neutral, and 3 of them thought they didn't gain anything out of it.

Once I gathered all surveys, I compared the post and pre surveys, and overall about 88% of them answered at least learning one new thing from the workshops. Which is better than what I anticipated. My expectation was to get very few responses and about 50% saying they at least learned something new. However, I exceeded my own expectations, of course giving credit to the students for actually participating in filling out the surveys, asking questions, and being active listeners.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the acquired results, I would say my overall success with my project was 95% successful, in the sense that I was able to give the students an incentive to think about their future. It is satisfying that I was able to share my own personal experience as a former community college student, and my now experience as a university student. As well as share a background part of me with them. My project was a success because I was able to leave students with the thought that they can achieve anything they set their minds to, whether it be college, career/job, or passion, it wouldn't matter as long as they pursue something they will enjoy and be successful in. My overall goal is for students who are graduating, to continue their education and/or obtain good jobs or careers, and become good citizens of society. After all, they are our future, so being able to help feed them knowledge, that there are no limits to their dreams, and for them to not let their past define who they are as people.

Some recommendations I would give to the program is to incorporate a “ Career Day.” Which would consist of having a few different professionals come and talk to students about their jobs/career, life, struggles, and how they got to where they are. This would give students insight into learning about different career paths. For example, people who took an educational path and people who chose otherwise, but are still successful. This would be adding onto the project of motivating youth onto post-secondary success, and it will be beneficial for the learning and educational growth of the youth. Especially taking into consideration they are at-risk youth, learning that there are opportunities out there for them could open their eyes to a new perspective about educational opportunities or career paths. After all, they will become part of society, we want to nourish their growth with positive influences. This way, we can also deter from the stereotypes, labels, and stigmas about at-risk youth.

Resources

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Appendices

For this project the method of research used was surveys. Figure 1 demonstrates my scope of work and how my project was carried out. It provides specific dates when each event and task took place. Figure 2 illustrates the pre-survey given to the students. Figure 3 shows the post-survey given to students. This method seemed the most effective to gather information from students in regards to their thoughts about pursuing post-secondary success.

Figure 1. Scope of Work

Task	Timeline	Parties Involved	Materials/Services Needed	Completed Product
Discussed capstone ideas with professor	Nov/Dec 2021	Professor Zuleima & intern	none	completed
Researched Community Colleges (California)	January 2022	Intern	Computer and Research skills	completed
Researched Jobs with no higher education needed	February 2022	Intern	Computer and Research skills	completed
Researched vocational & building trade schools	February 2022	Intern	Computer and Research skills	completed
Discussed Capstone Project Idea w/Mentor	February 02,2022	Mentor & Intern	none	completed
Capstone Project Approval	February 18, 2022	Mentor	none	completed
Create Survey	February 2022	Intern	Google Form	completed
Create presentation for workshops	February/March 2022	Intern	PowerPoint	completed

Running Head: MOTIVATING YOUTH ON PROBATION TO POST-SECONDARY SUCCESS

1st workshop Pre-survey	March 30, 2022	Intern, Mentor, third party, & students	Surveys and a classroom	completed
1st workshop- community colleges	March 30, 2022	Intern, Mentor, third party, & students	PowerPoint presentation, laptop, projector, and a classroom	completed
2nd workshop- Job information/ opportunities	April 25, 2022	Intern, Mentor, third party, & students	PowerPoint presentation, laptop, projector, and a classroom	completed
2ndworkshop- post-survey	April 25, 2022	Intern, Mentor, third party, & students	Surveys	completed
Analyze the data of the project	April 2022	Intern	Gathered data	completed
Prepare Capstone Presentation	April/May 2022	Intern	PowerPoint	completed
Complete Capstone Requirements	May 04, 2022	Intern		completed
Final-Capstone Festival	May 13, 2022	Intern	Poster/Presentation	

Figure 2. *Pre-Survey students were given to gather information in regards to their ethnic background and what they knew about college.*

Name:

1. What is your ethnic background?
 Hispanic/Latinx
 Asian
 White
 Pacific Islander
 African American
 Other:

2. Do you know someone who is in college?
 Yes
 No
 I don't know

3. Has someone talked to you about college before?
 Yes
 No
If so, who:

4. Are you a first-generation student going to college?
 Yes
 No
 Don't know

5. Do you plan on pursuing higher education?
 Yes
 No
 Don't know

6. What is something you would like to know/learn about college?

7. On a scale of 1-5 how sure are you of what you are doing after graduation?

1 2 3 4 5

Figure 3. *Post-Survey students were given to gather data and information on how useful and helpful the workshops were. It also provided information about possible plans students might have a few years from now.*

Name:

1. What is your ethnic background?
 Hispanic/Latinx
 Asian
 White
 Pacific Islander
 African American
 Other:
2. Do you know someone who is in college?
 Yes
 No
 I don't know
3. Has someone talked to you about college before?
 Yes
 No
If so, who:
4. Are you a first-generation student going to college?
 Yes
 No
 Don't know
5. Do you plan on pursuing higher education?
 Yes
 No
 Don't know
6. What is something you would like to know/learn about college?
7. On a scale of 1-5 how sure are you of what you are doing after graduation?

1 2 3 4 5