

Developing *YOUth!*

Research Brief #4: Positive Peer Culture

This is part of Transition Points, a series of briefs describing the lived experiences of some alumni of the Museum's youth development program as they matriculated through college. For more details, background and other briefs visit <http://bit.ly/12345>

At a Glance

Youth in the Science Minors and Achievers program at the Museum of Science and Industry found that their peer community was essential and important part of their experiences in the program. In the following report, we discuss how participants felt the program was positive and inclusive. In contrast, we take a look at how the lack of a positive peer community impacted some of participants once they were in college.

As part of the **Developing *YOUth!* Project**, we talked to youths from the Science Minors and Achievers (SMA) program at the Museum of Science and Industry, Chicago (MSI). This report is part of a series of briefs discussing the lived experiences of some of our participants as they graduated from the program and matriculated through college.

About the Study

The **Developing *YOUth!* Project** is a mixed-method, longitudinal study following graduates of the Science Minors and Achievers program at MSI. The program focuses on high school youths from historically underserved communities and aims to prepare them for college. This study combines annual surveys with in-depth repeated interviews to follow participants through their college and professional careers. As of 2023, we will have followed our oldest cohort of participants for eight years, allowing us to look more broadly at how our participants' experiences with STEM and within STEM spaces has changed over time.

For these briefs, we drew upon qualitative research methods such as participant observation and multiple years of formal and informal in-depth interviews. We aim to center some of their lived experiences within STEM formal and informal spaces, including within the Museum itself.

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Positive Peer Culture

While At MSI

Most youth described the peer culture in the Museum as quite positive, which contributed to the supportive environment. Participants specifically identified diversity and a widespread sense of ambition and motivation among youth to contribute to the program's positive peer culture. Youth often commented that peers in the program were extremely diverse in terms of their gender, racial and ethnic identities, religion, socioeconomic status, family immigration status, school experience (public, private, homeschooled), and the area in which they lived (urban, suburban, rural). Nearly every alumnus we interviewed mentioned that they appreciated the diverse nature of the group and found it to be a strength of the program. Ray said,

Before the Museum, I didn't really actually know any Black people. [Here,] I got to meet people that had different views, that had different interests, that, you know, showed me things that I wouldn't have seen before. [...] It just, it helped me to see the world less in terms of 'us vs. them'. But also, you know, that the rest of the world is a much more beautiful place.

Youth repeatedly described the culture of the SMA program as accepting and inclusive. Some participants commented that they believed the diversity of the youth in the program helped to create that culture. Tiana likened the culture of the SMA to that of a family, saying:

It's basically a family outside of your house. Cause that's how I feel when I go to the museum. [...] It means, not everybody in a family gets along... but when you have that [level of] of respect, and you have that level of acceptance, you know that no matter what, you're going to be accepted and it makes you feel important. It makes you feel empowered.

While In College

The same youth, however, had different experiences in college outside of the MSI community. Emma identifies as a Black African American woman and majored in Computer Science at a large public university. She joined and was active in multiple student organizations for Black Students in STEM at her college, which she described as mostly helpful earlier in her college years. While Emma did find some supportive peer and mentor networks within these organizations, the classes in her major lacked diversity and were predominantly white.

Being like, the only Black woman in my class or sometimes the only Black person, I think that I was kind of expecting that, but I didn't realize how isolated I would feel until like, I was actually in those situations

Emma's response was to normalize the experience.

I think that... I don't know. I just kind of like, just put my head down and do what I have to do. I try not to think about it too much, because it just didn't go away. Like, it just became the normal for me. Because like in my instance, sometimes I'm the only woman on my entire team, or the only Black person on their entire team and so—or both, usually both. It just became normal for me. And it was familiar, like the feeling of being isolated, or like being alone, that was familiar to me. And so after a while, I just didn't even process it as much as I did in the beginning.

But that normalization had its consequences:

The other kids, they had study groups and things of that sort. And, for me, it was very hard to find people that I connected to who were also in my major. And so, I mainly did all my homework... I pretty—well I never had a study group, to be honest. And the only time I ever worked with another person was in office hours with my professor or the TA's or something like that. So I think that having to navigate that experience by myself, for the most part, [was] really, like challenging and stressful.

At the time of our interview, Emma had recently graduated and was on the job market, looking for a position as a software engineer. She was unenthusiastic about her career prospects, explaining that she was passionate about art, creativity, and community-building, but that she rarely encountered and did not expect to find positions that allowed her to do what she loved within her expertise as a software engineer.

Implications

While The diversity of the Museum experience was valued by the youth. However, for many that diversity was absent in the colleges they attended. Instead of finding a home with their peers, they felt alone. Some changed schools, some changed majors, and some stuck with it but graduated with less optimism and enthusiasm for STEM and their future as a whole.

Positive youth development (PYD) programs rightfully focus on the positive aspects of what youth bring to an experience and what they can achieve. However, more work may need to be done to prepare them for situations without the kind of scaffolded support PYD programs offer. Certainly, more research needs to be done about the transition from high school to college for these young adults.

Introducing Our Youth and Young Adults

These research briefs center the lived experiences of program alumni who began as youth and are now young adults. This is a little more about them.

Emma

Emma identifies as a Black woman and graduated with a bachelor's degree in computer science. She is currently exploring opportunities as a software engineer. Emma hopes to have the freedom in her career to integrate her passion for art and design with her math and computer science skills.

Ray

Ray identifies as a white, Latino, and Jewish man. At the time of our last interviews, he was an engineer working in research and development for a manufacturing company. In addition, he was working on his Master of Engineering in Mechanical Engineering.

Tiana

Tiana identifies as a Black woman and graduated with a degree in Environmental Science and Policy. She hopes to design and coordinate programs that help engage youths and adults with STEM fields. Tiana aspires to do this work by becoming a director or manager of an education department at a cultural institution, such as museum.

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