

Summer Search: The True Impact of Mentorship

Laura Rojas and Emily Marchese 04 April 2011

Introduction

Why, in a developed country like the United States, where free public education is available in almost every city, are there so many nonprofits focused on education and youth? Is public education not enough anymore? In recent years, public education has lost its power to “equalize” high- and low-income families. Summer Search provides students with the character-building extracurricular activities and mentoring support that will keep them motivated throughout the challenges of puberty, high school and college. Unfortunately, low-income students have difficulty finding this in their own families, and many nonprofits try to fill the gap in some way, but only Summer Search offers a holistic service.

Summer Search deeply believes in the pressing need to level the playing field, and offers a combination of experiential learning and practical skills, one-to-one mentoring, and a support network that will keep low-income students in a positive trajectory towards college. Through these services, students develop their leadership and communication skills, and become reflective and accountable individuals who are not afraid to dream of a

better life. They know and happily accept the challenge that their life is their own and that they alone are responsible for making the best out of it. This motivation, this fight against resignation, is what Summer Search's students receive throughout the program, and it is what keeps them on the right track to becoming well-prepared citizens who will positively contribute to society.

Summer Search's model has been overwhelmingly effective in helping students graduate from high school in all seven cities in which it operates, and Philadelphia is no exception. After four years in operation, Summer Search Philadelphia has a high school graduation rate of 100 percent and a college attrition rate of 100 percent. The benefits accrue not only to these students themselves, but to society as a whole.

The Problem: An Uneven Playing Field

The Problem: An Uneven Playing Field

Education has proven to be one of the most effective vehicles for achieving upward social mobility in America. But upward social mobility can be more easily achieved if the education students receive gives them the skills needed to continue on to higher education and if the students are motivated and willing to stay in high school until they graduate.

Nationally, in October 2008, approximately three million

16- through 24-year-olds either dropped out of high school or did not attend one. This translates to 8 percent of American youth who do not have a high school diploma. In Philadelphia in 2009, only 56 percent of students graduated from high school (Mayor Michael A. Nutter's Office of Education 2010). According to the Center for Labor Market Studies:

Dropping out of high school imposes very high costs on the individual who drops out of school mainly through poor labor market outcomes. Other costs imposed are restricted access to higher education and training and a weaker voice in the political and electoral system. The weak labor market outcomes of high school dropouts result in reduced annual earnings, low income levels, a sharply higher risk of poverty, and all the negative personal and family consequences associated with life at the margins of the labor market. . . . [E]mployment opportunities for unskilled persons have declined sharply as the industry structure of employment has shifted from manufacturing to service industries and as the production of the nation's output has become more technologically sophisticated raising the literacy and educational requirements of the workforce (Fogg, Harrington, and Khatiwada, 2009).

Although a labor market exists for unskilled workers, legal and illegal immigration and the effects of globalization offering cheaper labor force markets have reduced unskilled employment rates and wages.

This change in the structure of our economy makes a college degree no longer a luxury but a must-have. College degrees allow individuals to specialize and differentiate themselves in an ever-growing labor market, access higher-paying jobs, expand their network of professional and personal relationships and continue on to postgraduate education.

While dropping out of high school has negative effects on the individual, it also has an important effect on society as a whole. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, dropouts' lower incomes and lower level of participation in the labor force means that dropouts contribute less taxes, are more reliant on health and welfare systems, and make up a higher percentage of prison and death row inmates (Chapman et al. 2010).

National statistics show how making an immediate transition from high school to college is related to family income and parents' level of education (Aud et al. 2010). Overall, 69 percent of high school graduates transition to college, and the gap between high- and low-income students is about 25 percent. While 82 percent of high-income students transition immediately to college, only 57 percent of low-income students follow the same track. Looking at the parents' level of education, we can see a 29 percent gap between students who transitioned to college whose parents had at least a bachelor's degree (82 percent) vs. students whose parents had at most a high school degree (54 percent). High-income families

with high levels of education provide the student with resources, connections, support and knowledge of what needs to be done in order to succeed academically. They transmit the values and serve as an example of why graduating from high school and later on from college determines the future of the teenager.

Who supports and guides low-income high school students who might be the first generation in their family to go to college? Who can understand what they are going through and help them have the same opportunities as high-income students? How can we level the playing field for low-income students have the potential to thrive?

The History of Summer Search

Summer Search is a national organization that was founded in San Francisco in 1990 by family and adolescent counselor Linda Mornell. Mornell, the mother of two herself, first saw the benefits of summer trips for high school students when her own children and their friends participated in summer experiential programs:

My own children had so many resources, and during their challenging adolescent years they gained a lot of confidence from doing summer programs. I became interested in the transformative power of those experiences and saw they were almost exclusively available for affluent families. I wanted to provide diversity and make it a richer experience for everyone (Haughey

2010).

As a result, Mornell sought funding through friends and family to be able to provide scholarships to low-income students from nearby schools so that they too might partake in these summer experiences. However, feeling that this was not enough, Mornell went on to create a program that would accompany the trips with one-on-one mentorship and advisement for the participants. In 1990, she piloted the program with a group of fourteen students, and this model grew into Summer Search in communities across the country.

Summer Search Philadelphia is Summer Search's newest branch. Established in 2006 and piloted with its first class of students in 2007, Summer Search came to Philadelphia at the request of the School District of Philadelphia, which recognized its problem of low graduation rates and even lower college enrollment rates. The district contacted the national office in 2005, and a year later Summer Search Philadelphia was established. Now, Summer Search Philadelphia works with over ninety students from more than ten schools across the city. They have graduated 99.6 percent of all of their students, and helped send 96 percent of them on to college or university.

The Summer Search Solution

The Summer Search Solution

Summer Search has been so successful in Philadelphia, as well as in all its branches, because of the comprehensive nature of its model. "We offer a very holistic, individualized program that is operating year round," says Elizabeth Stamm, Development Manager at Summer Search Philadelphia. Summer Search realizes that academic success can be influenced just as much outside the classroom as within, and also that individual success is determined by more than just academics. As a result, Summer Search uses a multi-faceted approach that is in large part inspired by Mornell's experience with adolescent psychology. This approach begins with the selection process.

Students must be recommended to Summer Search through referral partners who work directly with the students in local high schools. Young men and women who are selected do not necessarily have to excel academically, but must demonstrate seeds of specific leadership qualities. Upon referral, students apply for an hour-long individual interview with a member of the Summer Search team, in which they are evaluated based on their aptitude for the Reflection-Altruism-Performance (RAP) behaviors that Summer Search finds essential for their program (see chart). It is these characteristics that Summer Search is uniquely adept at fostering and that eventually lead Summer Search alumni to greater achievement in their lives and communities. Summer Search chooses to focus on these skills because they see

them as keys to personal as well as civic development.

All of Summer Search's programming is geared toward nurturing these behaviors and characteristics in ways that will equip the student with the necessary tools to overcome the obstacles they face academically and elsewhere. The "Performance" set of skills, including problem-solving, communication, adaptability and follow through, are essential for success in higher education and in any workplace. The "Reflection" skills are encouraged to give the students enhanced motivation as well as a better understanding of themselves and others. Finally, the "Altruism" skill set is included to create a population of students who are not only equipped to improve their own lives, but also dedicated to improving the lives of others. Fostering empathy, appreciation and service is meant to encourage every Summer Search graduate to give to others in the same way they have been given to, thus magnifying the Summer Search impact exponentially.

Taken together, these skills have been found to be aspects of a sort of ideal personality that has been proven to be attractive to employers. While this was not Summer Search's original intent in focusing on these behaviors, it is important to note that they do have a positive consequence not only in the personal and civic lives of the students, but also in their professional lives.

A Five-Year Program

Summer Search students generally start the program during their sophomore year of high school and continue on through their second year of college or university. During high school they participate in Summer Search programs all year round, attending workshops and one-on-one mentoring during the school year and participating in challenging summer trips over two consecutive summers. While in college they continue to communicate regularly with their mentors, and can participate in Summer Search alumni activities. The workshops focus on practical skills for the students, including SAT preparation, postsecondary goals, college preparation and financial aid applications, while the mentorship is intended to provide guidance and a support system. It is the summer trips, however, that many feel to be the life-changing experiences that truly cement Summer Search's lessons for the students. Umar, a graduate of Mariana Bracetti Academy, describes his experience and what he learned from his first summer trip to Seattle:

I most enjoyed the challenge of rock climbing. While climbing I was shaking but I knew I had to keep moving up the wall because if I stopped I would have never made it. I was forced to trust the person holding the rope in order to succeed. Looking back now, I relate climbing up the wall to climbing through life. Just like the wall, if I stop and shake in fear I will never succeed. I changed in 22 days. . . . I progressed and even I see that my confidence has

grown. I share my thoughts and opinions in class and see that teachers and students value them. On course I led by example and I continue to use this skill in Philadelphia.

These essential life lessons of trust, confidence and overcoming fear are things that cannot be taught by one person to another, but must be learned from pushing yourself as Umar did. Without Summer Search, students like Umar would rarely have the opportunity to be outside of their comfort zone while still connected to a network of support and encouragement, and would therefore risk never learning these lessons.

The second summer trip looks to challenge participants mentally and emotionally to encourage a different kind of personal growth. Students are asked to find a service trip, an international home-stay or an academic summer program for their second summer experience. On this trip, the focus is more on further establishing the RAP behaviors, and therefore on urging students to find success academically or as civic leaders. The progress they make in a university setting or in serving others will give them a glimpse of the success they can have as college students and community leaders, thus encouraging them to continue toward those ends. Prior to this trip the students are required to do much of their own planning—finding an opportunity, applying for a position and handling the logistics themselves. Often this is the first experience the students have with this type of responsibility and independence. Being trusted to handle

the arrangements themselves, while still having the supervision and support of their mentors, prepares them for future responsibilities such as filling out school or job applications or balancing hectic schedules. As an example of success, it also proves to students their own capabilities, and therefore motivates them to not give up on academic or personal goals.

Mentors Make the Difference

Mentors Make the Difference

While the participation in summer programs and supplemental workshop training that Summer Search students receive certainly go a long way in helping the students achieve their goals of graduating high school and heading on to college, these activities alone cannot explain Summer Search's exceptionally high success rates. Many programs in Philadelphia send students on challenging excursions, and even more offer academic training and college preparatory courses. Very few, however, come close to the graduation rates that Summer Search has come to expect. What sets Summer Search apart from these other organizations is exactly what Linda Mornell first noticed over twenty years ago; in order for these interventions to have a lasting impact, they must be accompanied by professional mentoring.

Summer Search Philadelphia's mentors are full-time staff members who are highly trained in mental and emotional

adolescent development. This training, along with the greater amount of time and dedication the mentors are able to give their students thanks to being staff rather than volunteers, allows Summer Search mentors to better understand the internal issues the students are facing. Program Director Olanike Ayomide tells the story of one of her students who recently started college. The girl called Ayomide one day in a panic, exclaiming that she hated her new school and had to transfer. After a lengthy conversation, Ayomide was able to discern that the anxiety the girl was experiencing stemmed not from her choice of school, but rather from feelings of doubt and insecurity about being the first member of her family to graduate high school and attend college. With this understanding, Ayomide was able to help the girl understand the true reasons for her anxiety and then help her to deal with them. Such issues arise often for Summer Search's students. Without a trusting, sustained relationship with a mentor like Ayomide they can go unrecognized and unresolved and often lead to failure.

Each Summer Search student is assigned a mentor during the first year of participation, and, barring unforeseen events, will stay with that mentor until leaving the program during the sophomore year of college. While in high school, students are required to be in contact with their mentors at least once every week. This stability helps foster the trust between the mentor and the student that allows for straightforward, open communication. The

mentors not only understand and support the students, but also challenge them when necessary. Ayomide explains, "The mentoring is really reflective listening to the student, holding them to their behaviors, to their thinking patterns, to anything they wouldn't notice, and helping them to discover different things about themselves and to work on different things about themselves." More than anything, she says, "The mentor is there to challenge you, to help you see things that you haven't seen or that you don't want to see."

Using a rubric they have created to quantify the students' exhibition of RAP behaviors, the mentors also track the students in each of their encounters. They take note when the student is being more or less reflective, whether or not they are using their problem-solving skills, if and when they are looking to give back to their community, etc. When they see a change (positive or negative), it is their role to challenge the student to see this change and to understand why the change has taken place. Although students obviously fluctuate in their level of skill in different areas at different times, overall the mentor is looking for an upward trajectory in all of the RAP categories. Through their mentorship, they hold the students accountable for this trajectory. Summer Search believes that these characteristics are indispensable life skills, and therefore keeps them at the forefront of their goals for mentoring and student development.

Through its mix of practical training, behavioral guidance

and professional support, Summer Search provides a system for students that leads not only to personal success, but also to a greater societal impact. Students who participate in Summer Search are not just taught life skills, but also helped to see the importance of altruism and positive support in their communities. Nationally, 72 percent of Summer Search graduates are involved in service to the community. If this number holds true for the Philadelphia office, roughly 70 young men and women from the current Summer Search classes will give back to the city of Philadelphia. Further, each student who graduates from Summer Search and goes on to college becomes an example of success to those around them. Their propensity for service suggests that they will use what they have learned to create support systems for countless other young men and women in their families and neighborhoods.

Henry, a current Summer Search Philadelphia student, explains how the lessons Summer Search taught him have helped him reach out to his family. "My family is always in need of help, and now I can serve them more without getting easily frustrated. Also, being resilient and patient will help me communicate more effectively with my family about our issues." With increased practical skills such as filling out college applications and heightened RAP behaviors like problem-solving and empathy, they will be able to help their brothers, sisters, cousins or neighbors in ways that they could not be helped by their support

systems. In fact, Ayomide expresses this as one of Summer Search Philadelphia's primary goals: "What we're working to do is to change that student's life to impact them and to help them learn their own leadership potential, but also to give them all these practical experiences and tools along the way that if their life is changed they can come back and help their community and their family. They are examples for everybody that's around them."

Social Return on Investment

Social Return on Investment

In addition to Summer Search's outstanding high school graduation and college enrollment and retention results, the program has a remarkable social return on investment.

The total cost for one student in the five-year Summer Search program, including the two summer trips (national and international), personalized mentoring services, college advising, Bridge Alumni, having a prepared staff to serve them and the administrative costs of running the operation, is \$33,572.

As a consequence of being exposed to different, challenging and exciting experiences through the summer trips in conjunction with the weekly mentoring sessions where the student reflects, is held accountable, and at the same time develops his or her communication skills, the

Summer Search students develop the confidence that anything is possible if they work for it. Christian, a junior at West Philadelphia High School, expressed this well: "I feel more responsible, and I've realized I don't have time to waste sitting around waiting for opportunities to find me. My life isn't in anyone's hands but mine."

Summer Search unlocks their yearning for a better and brighter future and develops in them the tools that they will need to achieve what they dream. They realize that graduating from high school and pursuing college is an open door that could bring them closer to a better life, not only for them, but for their family, their community and society in general. As Umar puts it, "Before Summer Search, I went through life by saying, 'The sky is the limit.' But now I know the sky is not the limit. I can go beyond that."

According to a study of leadership skills and wages published by the Journal of Labor Economics, "Employers of new college graduates report that communications skills, motivation/initiative, teamwork skills, and leadership skills are all more highly valued than academic achievement/GPA" (NACE 2000). The authors estimate that leadership skills have an 18 percent effect on earnings. Other research has shown that "Sociability, friendliness, thoughtfulness and general activity have an effect on earnings independent of parental background, cognitive ability and schooling."

By graduating from high school and earning at least an associate degree, a Summer Search student will have average lifetime earnings of \$1,389,858, which is \$932,769 more than the average high school dropout would earn in his or her lifetime. If we assume that the Summer Search student would have graduated from high school even without Summer Search, then the return to the student would be \$519,233.

Education Degree	Mean Annual Earnings	Mean Lifetime Earnings
High school dropout	\$9,663	\$457,08
High school graduate	\$19,437	\$870,62
Associate degree	\$26,723	\$1,177,846
BS or higher	\$47,613	\$2,051,455

Source: Fogg, Harrington, and Khatiwada (2009).

For society at large, Summer Search's outcomes have a positive and quantifiable benefit. By ensuring that these students will graduate from high school and pursue college education, Summer Search is decreasing the number of dropouts who would otherwise incur both monetary and non-monetary social costs. High school dropouts contribute less to federal, state and local taxes, rely on cash and noncash government income transfers, and have a higher probability of being incarcerated (a cost

also assumed by society) (Fogg, Harrington and Khatiwada 2009).

According to the Center for Labor Market Studies, the lifetime mean annual net fiscal contributions¹ of adult Philadelphian high school dropouts is (-)\$319,000.

Meanwhile, an adult with a high school degree is expected to have a positive fiscal contribution of \$261,000, and with an associate degree of \$260,000. Therefore, the return to society is not only the positive net fiscal contribution of the high school graduate or associate graduate, but also the savings of \$319,000 that a dropout would cost society. In total, a person with an associate degree who would not have otherwise graduated from high school would have a return to society of \$579,000.

In addition to the quantifiable benefits to society that a Summer Search student would bring, it is also important to consider the student's qualitative positive effect as a role model in his or her family and community. Summer Search students are living proof that opportunities are everywhere and for everyone to take, if they are willing to work for them. They are an example to their siblings and peers, a sense of pride to their parents and a motivation for teachers and mentors who have helped them to continue to support other students like them.

In conclusion, taking into account the cost of the five-year Summer Search program, the return to the student and the return to society, we find that Summer Search has an

impressive social return on investment. It is important to note that since it is impossible to determine how many Summer Search students would have graduated high school with or without Summer Search's help, we calculated the net social return on investment for both scenarios.

In the case where the Summer Search student otherwise would have dropped out of high school, Summer Search has a social return on investment of \$1,479,197. This means that for every dollar invested by Summer Search in a potential high school dropout student, society gets \$44 back.

In the case where the student would have graduated from high school without Summer Search but not pursued a higher level of education, Summer Search has a social return on investment of \$484,661. For every dollar invested by Summer Search in this type of student, society gets \$14 back.

Social Return on Investment	Earned associate degree and would <i>not</i> have graduated from high school	Earn and high
Return to the student	\$ 932,197	\$ 51
Return to society	+ \$ 579,000	+ \$ (
Cost of the program	- \$ 33,572	- \$ €
Total Social		

Return on Investment	\$ 1,479,197	\$ 48
----------------------	--------------	-------

Conclusion

Conclusion

Thanks to Summer Search's impact, more and more students each year are becoming educated, civic-minded contributors to society, an outcome whose true value obviously goes beyond the financial gain we have estimated. However, in order to ensure these positive returns, it is essential for Summer Search to strengthen its funding base. Summer Search's Philadelphia office is in transition as its initial funding from the national office is projected to be spent down within the next two years.

At a time when the nation seems to be recognizing the flaws of the public educational system and its tendency to let many students fall through its cracks, Summer Search Philadelphia's remarkable results prove its model to be a promising solution. What's even more encouraging is that this is a model easily replicated in any community.

Summer Search has already reproduced itself in seven cities across the nation, with remarkably high success rates. In locations as different as Silicon Valley and New York City, the Summer Search model has been implemented to fulfill students' needs and help them achieve their goals. It has succeeded everywhere it has

been tried.

Moreover, through adopting some of Summer Search's techniques, youth development organizations that already exist throughout the nation could very easily see the same success. Summer Search's example shows that having a mentoring staff of trained professionals dedicated to strengthening the students' RAP behaviors and providing them emotional support will result in a class of participants who are mentally capable of success. By providing practical college-prep skills and increasing access to extracurricular activities and leadership opportunities, the organizations can also give them the practical knowhow to graduate high school, obtain a degree, and become a professional.

With a staff of professionals trained and dedicated to support teens through high school and onto college, and with increased access to extracurricular activities and leadership opportunities, students across the country will be able succeed regardless of their families' income or educational level.

Laura Rojas is an MS candidate in Nonprofit and Non-governmental Leadership at the University of Pennsylvania. Laura earned a Bachelor of Arts in Economics from Universidad de Los Andes in Bogota, Colombia. She cofounded a nonprofit organization that has advanced child development for underprivileged children in Bogota for the past 10

years, while at the same time working as a business consultant and processes director in the private sector.

Emily Marchese is a candidate for an MS in Nonprofit and Non-governmental Leadership from the University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Policy and Practice. Emily earned a BA from Boston College, and has dedicated herself to studying and working toward increased global economic justice.

References

Aud, S., W. Hussar, M. Planty, et al. (2010). *The Condition of Education 2010* (NCES 2010-028). National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Washington, D.C.

Chapman, C., J. Laird, and A. KewalRamani. (2010). *Trends in High School Dropout and Completion Rates in the United States: 1972–2008* (NCES 2011-012). National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Washington, D.C. Available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch>.

Eren, O., and I. S. Ozbeklik. (2010). Leadership skills and wages revisited: Is there a causal relation? Working paper, University of Nevada. .

Fogg, N., P. Harrington, and I. Khatiwada. (2009). *The Tax and Transfer Fiscal Impacts of Dropping Out of High School in Philadelphia City and Suburbs*. Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University

Diplomas Count 2010. Graduation by the Numbers: Putting Data to Work for Student Success. (2010). *Education Week*, June 10. Available at <http://www.edweek.org/ew/toc/2010/06/10/index.html>.

Haughey, S. (2010). Linda Mornell on grooming teens for success. *San Francisco Examiner*, December 12.

Kuhn, P., and C.. (2005). Leadership skills and wages. *Journal of Labor Economics* 23(3); 395-436.

Mayor Michael Nutter's Office of Education. *Shaping an Educated City: Two-Year Report on the Mayor's Education Goals, January 2008–December 2009*. Available at <http://www.phila.gov/PDFs/featureEducation.pdf>.

Martin, N., and S. Halperin. (2006). *Whatever It Takes: How Twelve Communities Are Reconnecting Out-of-School Youth*. Washington, D.C.: American Youth Policy Forum.

Nyhus, E., and E. Pons. The effects of personality on earnings. *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 26(3): 363-384. Web.

U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (CPS), October Supplement, 1972–2008.