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AUTHOR Facemyer, Kevin C.; Peterson, Nils S.
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ABSTRACT

Forty high school students from different areas in the western United States collaborated on a year-long project designed to prepare youth for successful school-to-life transitions. The predominant mechanisms of interaction were e-mail, synchronous chats, and shared threaded writing posted in a virtual space via the Internet. This paper presents four perspectives on the curriculum and online interactions designed to prepare youth for successful school-to-life transitions. Discussed is the role of advanced technology in relation to success, outreach, partnerships, and communities. After a description of the project, discussion moves to the lessons learned, the policy issues raised, and the best ways technology should be used in the future. (Contains 13 references.) (Author/AEF)

Virtual Organizations, Virtual Mentoring, and At-Risk Youth: Implementation of a New Metacommunity

By: Kevin C. Facemyer, & Nils S. Peterson,
With John Emerson, Claire Van Wingerden, and Tomikia Perkins

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Introduction

This paper, like the partnership it describes, has multiple perspectives, as evidenced by the following introductions, first in the eyes of the organizations and then in the eyes of the participants:

- Introduction One: The Casey Family Program and Washington State University's College of Education joined in a partnership to prepare youth in foster care to take their rightful place as contributing members of their communities by involving them in a yearlong online community composed of peers, mentors, and administrators.

  Introduction Two: Washington State University's College of Education and The Casey Family Program joined in a partnership to explore the use of online communities composed of peers, mentors, and administrators to foster learning, growth, and development of youth, expanding the children's understanding of being a contributing member of a community.

  Introduction Three: Students at Washington State University and youth in the foster care of The Casey Family Program joined in a online partnership of recreation, informal and formal advising and education to foster growth and development of youth in foster care, enabling the children to grow as they developed new relationships with older peers.

  Introduction Four: Youth in the foster care of The Casey Family Program and students of Washington State University joined in a online partnership of recreation, as well as informal and formal advising and education to foster growth and development. University students developed skills related to teaching, mentoring, counseling, online communications, and technical support as they matured into positions of service and education.

All four of these scenarios are true, valid and reasonable perspectives. Viewing this project from these various perspectives illuminates the fundamental features of good partnerships (mutual reciprocity) and hints at optimum outcomes (transformation of people and organizations).

Preview of Conclusion: Most of the interactions in this partnership were engineered for mutual reciprocity and transformation. When the interactions were unsatisfactory, we often found them out of alignment with respect to the goals of mutual reciprocity and transformation. In general, unsatisfactory interactions were the result of asymmetries between benefit and effort, lapses into transactional relationships or nonviable virtual organizational elements.

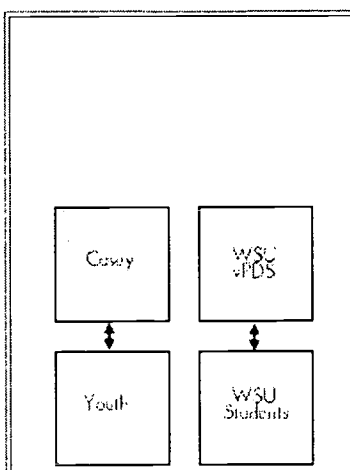
To reach this conclusion, we will explore this partnership and partnerships in general, by discussing:

1. the project

2. the lessons learned
3. the policy issues raised by such projects and
4. the best ways technology should be used in the future to
    - extend communities,
    - enrich collaboration, and
    - link together research, teaching, and public service.

The Project

We will describe the project in terms of its institutional interactions and then give a participant perspective on the project. This box metaphor will provide the scaffolding for vignettes and testimony by various authors of this paper.

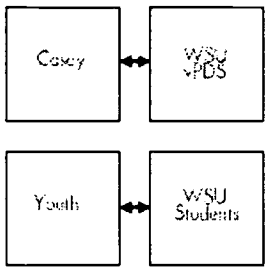


This is a diagram of the project participants. The arrows represent traditional interactions defined by the organizational relationships to their constituents.

Casey has a long standing tradition of providing long term foster care to at-risk youth. WSU has a long term commitment to educating teachers and administrators. WSU has rarely interacted with service

In 1995 Tom Helm, then director of education for The Casey Family Program (Casey) watched the WSU Virtual Professional Development School (vPDS) host and conduct an online world wide science fair (Fair). The vPDS (Abdal-Haqq, 1995) and the Fair received national (Holden, 1995; Sommerfeld, 1995; & Wilson, 1995) as well as local (Cole, 1995; Johnson, 1995; & McDouough, 1995) attention. As an innovative online meeting, the Fair and its use of the Internet to form community was perceived as a positive experience by participants, teachers and parents. The interaction between K-12 children, university faculty, scientists, and university students was a proof-of-concept regarding the use of email, bulletin boards, and shared writing as the basis for establishing a viable community of people from various arenas dedicated to various aspects of helping children do science. The Casey Family Program noticed the applicability of establishing online communities to promote growth in their youth.

Over three years, between 1995 and 1998, each organization had shifts in leadership. For Casey, John Emerson followed Sylvia Pizzini, who followed Tom Helm; for WSU Dean Judy Mitchell succeded Walt Gmelch, who succeded Bernie Oliver. This observation suggests that the institutional mission of each organization was driving this partnership rather than some other personal dynamic between the participants.



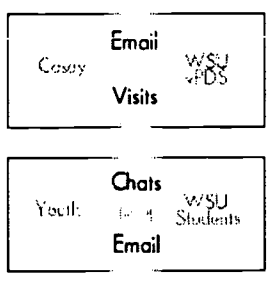
For several years negotiations between Casey and WSU took place to outline the interaction between a select group of WSU students to act as online mentors in a project called Casey Cougar Camp.

Youth and Mentors were given computers and trained in how to access the Internet. An online community was created through the use of the Web, ICQ & email.

For 11 months, Casey Youth, and two groups of university students, 'Mentors' and 'Hypernauts', were engaged in working toward 36 goals Casey had for its youth in a project called Casey Cougar Camp (CCC). 20 of these goals were predominantly technical (Youth will be able to use search engines, Youth will be able to FTP . . .) while 16 were predominantly social (Youth will work in a team, Youth will understand the importance of multiple cultures as they contribute to community . . .). Through a formal and informal curriculum comprised of Activities (College Search, Newsletter Compilation), Forums (online debates about the merits of school, debates about the best vocal performer, shaired New Year's Resolutions) and Chats, a community was created targeting these goals.

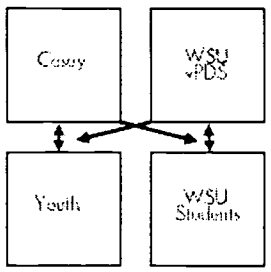
To manage that interaction between Youth and WSU Mentors & Hypernauts, Casey and WSU needed to establish a temporary system, a virtual organization.

To manage everything from communication lines in case of emergency, to billing and tracking of computers and services, Casey and WSU interacted by: email, telephone, chats, and visits; in that order of use.



Interaction between Youth and WSU students mimicked that of the administrative teams negotiating the interaction. Or vice versa.

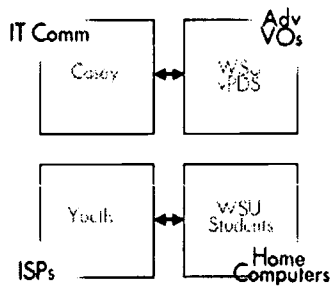
Youth met at a summer camp for 10 days, to establish friendships, to train on computers, and to develop rapport with Mentors. Casey leaders and WSU administrators had similar F2F interactions then shifted to mostly online communication modes.



Whether explicit or not, there were expectations of each organization by the other. Presumably WSU wanted Casey to fulfill its goal of enhancing technology use by its Youth and Staff. Casey presumably wanted WSU students and faculty to gain knowledge about at-risk youth.

Each group wanted to affect change and may have expected to be changed by the partnership.

Beyond the expected transformations, there were some unintended growth opportunities uncovered by this partnership. While the dynamics and limitations of traditional interactions (vertical interactions described by gray arrows in the figure above) were most apparent to participants; the new needs of one partner were more obvious to other partners. This distant perspective and the participation in an experimental interaction between traditional service entity (Casey) and its client (their foster youth) exposed several opportunities for growth and change in practice and expectations. (For instances, several times over the course of this activity Casey leaders and vPDS staff speculated about a time when the list of minimum requirements for participation as a Casey Foster Home would grow from ". . . electricity, hot running water, & telephone service" to include computer and an ISP.") It became clear that this partnership was going to change the expectations of all involved.



It is clear that both individuals and organizations uncovered new areas for growth and expansion. WSU vPDS learned it needed a better way to enact temporary systems and virtual organizational management schemes.

There is some hint that youth learned they needed ISPs; Students, home computers, and Casey, a more advanced IT communications system.

This unexpected growth in practices, or recognition of new needs, is a clear sign of true transactional partnerships. This trend of transformation (versus transaction) characterized many but not all aspects of this partnership. The satisfying, although challenging, aspects or this partnership were transformational, the unsatisfying ones were transactional.

(Policy Prelude: Try entering partnerships only if you are willing to find out if you or your organization needs to grow and change.)

The Lessons Learned

During the course of the partnership several lessons were learned:

- A good partnership should invest in a virtual organizational structure.
- In a good partnership, each organization can use the other for accountability and evaluation.
- There is a key transition in the relationship of partners when the partnership is based on transformational values rather than transactional values.

A good partnership should invest in a virtual organizational structure.

Toward the end of the CCC while we were attempting to transfer the expenses of the ISP to the homes of the Youth involved, we encountered a problem which would not have existed if we had had a virtual organization. In essence, WSU was trying to terminate a service that Casey was providing, and the service provider didn't recognize WSU's authority to do that. Had we instituted billing and management from a virtual organization called CCC (Casey Cougar Camp), we could have all acted with authority to provide and end services. Instead, we used existing structures within each of our organizations to bill, ship, and pay salaries. (We were very lucky that difficulties ending ISP services was our only organizational disaster story.) In cases where two functions straddle two organizations, creating a virtual organizational structure seems worthwhile.

In good partner relationships, each organization can use the other for accountability and evaluation.

Through the course of this partnership, WSU often used the Casey organization to keep aspects of the operation accountable. Phone logs, Youth progress logs, and online transcripts provided live unbiased testimony to the efforts and progress of CCC Youth and Mentors. More than once, WSU used Casey to bring the difficult message of accountability to Mentors who were showing statistically significant differences in effort or performance.

The injection of other organization's expectations into our daily practices helps us evaluate our own performance.

There is a key transition in the relation ship of partners when the partnership is based in transformational values rather than transactional values.

We hypothesize that the use of transformational activities (versus transactional) characterize successful partnerships and that partnerships predicated on transactions are limited, miss-named, or doomed to be frustrating. The distinction between transactional versus transformational has been outlined it two different arenas, classrooms and leadership.

Phillip Jackson in 1968, studied an educational setting and discovered two types of learning taking place.

- Transactional learning, is a situation where one bargains with learners to learn, and negotiates compromises about how much and what type of learning occurs.
- Transformational learning is a situation where all participants are active in learning and where learners take responsibility for the types and depths of the knowledge acquired.

Here is another view of the same two types of interaction, this example is from leadership but it is not or should not be unlike the relationship between instructors and students.

Political scientist James MacGregor Burns uses a similar formulation in his 1978 work on leadership.

- Transactional leadership is a limited compromise based on the mutual agreements of leader and follower; if you will perform Q for me I will award you Z.
- Transforming leadership is an expansive agreement between leader and follower based on mutual benefit. A leader finds goals within the follower and helps the follower achieve these goals with in a larger context of an organization. Leader: I help you achieve your goals in the context of our mutual organizational effort.

We found our attempts to bargain with learners, employees, or partners unsatisfying and generally produced limited results. We found that when our mutual goals coincided, growth and transformation was easy and fun.

An interesting transition of the CCC partnership occured in December of 1998. Casey and WSU each seemed to realize that the project had expanded in scope and focus and began a new set of relationships built on trust and an expectation of transformation. Where the specific transactions were negotiated and specified earlier, WSU now had license to freely configure resources to manage the project within its initial budget.

Very early in the Spring of 1999, the Hypernauts were introduced as content participants and peer advisors and an IT troubleshooter was introduced to assist in the technology problems. While these changes seem minor, they went outside the contractual plan and may have seriously hampered the partnership while it was still in its transactional phase.

The Policy Issues Raised

During the course of the partnership several policy level issues arose:

- Partnerships transform the duties and boundaries of each organization.
- Partnerships cost each party more (in unexpected/ unplanned ways) than a grant/contract scenario.
- Technologically enhanced partnerships challenge the established hierarchy and communications patterns of organizations.

We will describe each policy implication and provide evidence that this is a universal finding not specific to our partnership.

Partnerships transform the duties and boundaries of each organization.

During the course of the project, the transformation in the delivery methods and outcomes moved our activities out beyond many of the: (a) original Memos of Agreement between organizations, (b) job descriptions of employees and (c) expectations of youth participants. This was mostly due to the advances in practice, not to changes in the technology used.

However, the ongoing change due to technology often made technology, not the actual practices themselves, a scapegoat for dissatisfaction.

Development of a new online environment and development of database logs each contributed to redefining the duties and relationships between partners. The online environment of the CCC was created well after each group reached agreements on the modes of interaction. This meant changes to the expectations made of Youth and of Mentors. Had these agreements been immutable, the CCC would have been operating on 18 month old, hopelessly passe, technology. An experimental enterprise, such as ours, shackled to the technology that was current during the negotiation phase of the partnership, would be hampered by a transactional agreement.

While some changes in technologies simply changed the technical mechanics, such as the example above, others technological changes had more fundamental changes in roles and responsibilities, as demonstrated below. Changes in the mechanisms of logging and reporting Mentor-Youth interactions were made due to the advances in online databases. This was another example of technology advancing beyond the initial negotiated agreements. The implications of this advance were broader than the simple method of record keeping; in this instance the online nature of these databases allowed the Casey staff, administrators, Social workers, and possibly foster parents to view the progress of the Youth (an weekly online report card). This reporting advance, combined with the ease of analysis of primary documents in the online environment facilitated rapid analysis of camper progress by Casey administrators, Social Workers, WSU administrators, and theoretically parents. Where we had originally planned for WSU to report Casey on the progress of Youth, Casey was now in a position to directly review Youths' work, our records of Youths' progress, and inquire from Mentors their perspectives on that progress. The key feature of this change is a shift in the progress documenting role of the Mentors, from reporters with large editing and filtering powers, to archivists and catalogers of primary documents, with no filtering or editing capabilities.

Another example of changes in duties brought on by transformation during the partnership was the shift of Mentors from camp counselora to IT help desk staff. When the IT Help need arose, the transition was difficult because the implicit contract between WSU and Mentors was stated in terms of counselor and did not properly anticipate the magnitude of IT issues that Youth would face.

Changes in the online environment and the incorporation of the database logging Youth progress suggest that participants in transformational partnerships should invest more broadly and widely in terms of the envelope of expected duties. This is natural in a transformational partnership pampered by good resources to inject into the partnertship.

Example of partnerships transcending traditional boundaries: IBM, Motorola, & Apple made a new company to make chips. They built all the parts of a new company for this venture. It was a transformational partnership because each hoped that it would change their organization in important ways. They had a new fiscal agent, management structure, and roles and expectations within the partnership rather than within their old organizations.

Example of the misuse of the word partner: Global Village modems shipped in the Macs we used were not the result of a partnership. Though Apple calls Global Village a "strategic partner" they had very little stake in improving the product or practices of Global Village. Apple would not have invested in reengineering its system or the modems when the modems failed, rather they would cancel the contract for modems. This was a transactional interaction and not a partnership.

Partnerships cost each party more than a grant/contract scenario.

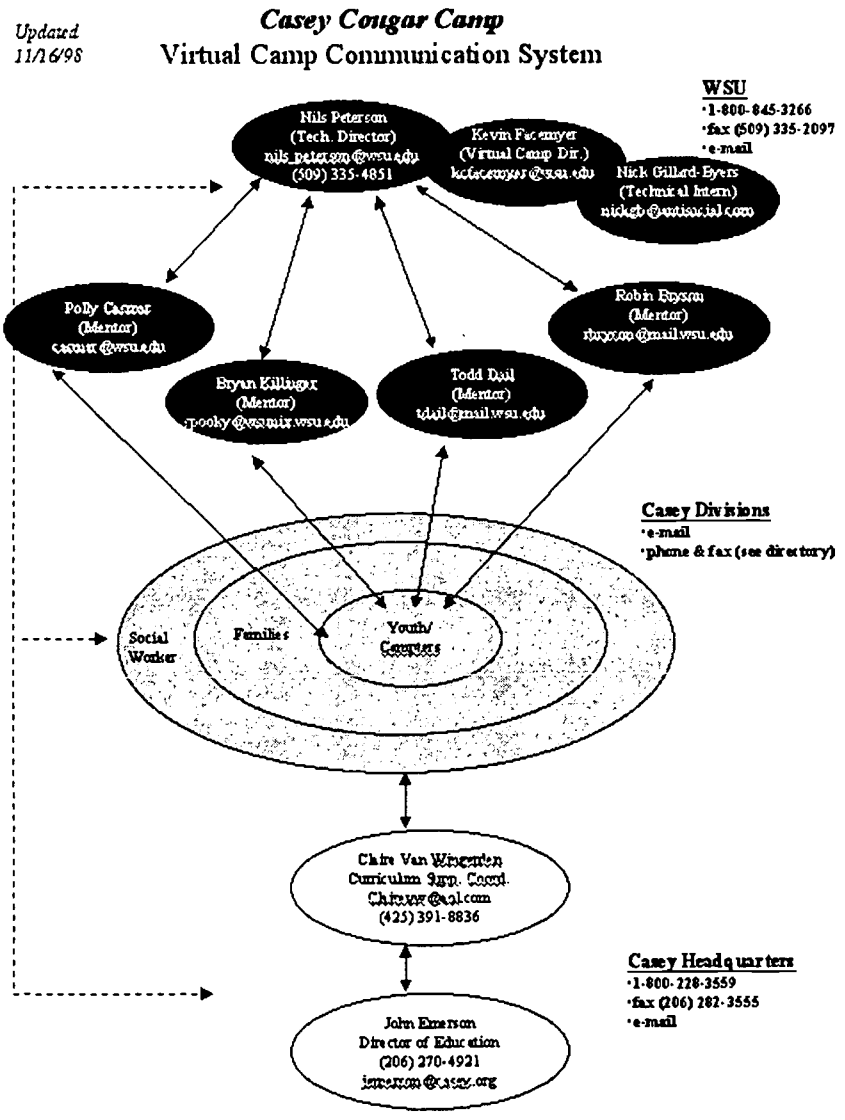
It has not been our experience that partnerships save money. Partnerships expand the scope of each organization's enterprises and challenge each organization's budgets and resources.

Partners spend more to make it work. In this partnership Casey experienced a significant cost overrun for ISP services for Youth. WSU experienced a talent exhaustion of its Mentors and had to enlist the aid of Hypernauts as a critical thinking SWAT team to engage the CCC Youth in curriculum and activities. WSU had to invest in a full time IT trouble shooter to remediate the unexpectedly high rate of technical failures experienced by the CCC Youth. Each of these were unplanned expenses.

A supposition: Any partnership that does not stretch the limits or budgets of the organizations entering it, is an alignment of oprganizations too similar in character to benefit form the partnership in any way other than a cost savings due to scale. Neither organization will be transformed.

Technologically enhanced partnerships challenge the hierarchy and communications patterns of organizations.

A corporate communication chart was drawn up to facilitate communication pathways between Casey and WSU. The ease and availability of almost all email addresses of all possible contacts in the two organizations challenged the traditional communication lines and hierarchies.



The communication chart at left fails to emphasize the large amount of communication between Claire and Mentors. One path of communications which is not even specified was used often, that of the Mentor-Social Worker contacts. (Social Workers largely did not participate in email.)

This chart implies that there was very little interaction between WSU administrators, Nils, Kevin, & Nick and Youth. Little could be further from the truth. John was also extensively involved in interacting with Youth.

These traditional pathways dissolved in the face of ubiquitous email address sharing and instant message services like AOL Instant Messenger and ICQ.

This partnership was enhanced by technology and that technology changed the methods of interaction and the character of that interaction. Most of that change centered on lowering communication barriers, and involving more individuals from each organization to do more at the level of the Youth. This is important. *If your organization does not want to participate in the wave of "disintermediation" of organizational development now passing through our organizations, avoid a transformational partnership that will involve communications technology.*

The Best Ways Technology Should Be Used In The Future

- to extend communities,
- to enrich collaboration, and
- to link together research, teaching, and public service.

Extend Communities

Today, using online technologies to create or extend community for specific populations seems to be an obvious conclusion, but in 1995-98 when the CCC partnership was created it was only an untested premise.

When Tomikia and I (Kevin) first met face to face in July 1999, she said "Nice to see you again" not "Nice to meet you". (She and I online met about 9 months earlier.) Tomikia's experience within the online community was rich enough that she and many other participants thought of it as a real place. Not just a metaphor anymore, Youth would "go" to the Speakeasy Café, where the Chats, Shared Writings and Projects were. Whether this is just a metaphorical construction in the language of participants or not as important as the level and amount of community established there, the amount of affiliation and belonging each participant had to the community. (It varied among paticipants of course.)

One youth stated after the year long experience, *"We lived in different cites, we don't see each other, and its hard to visit places so far away, but we were able to stay connected. The best part of CCC was interacting with people using email. Camp was very encouraging."*

This testimonial seems to support the contention that technology enhanced communities exist where they would not have without technology.

The extension of community into the dynamic interdisciplinary boundaries of research (Vaisman, 1995) supports the contention that there is a large potential for technology and online communities to transform our definition of community. Currently we are proposing that there is a new type of groupwork called *metacommunity*. It is predominated by neither vertical nor horizontal interactions, it is based on a flattened hierarchy, and it is dispersed in space and distinctly different from the local culture and local community.

We believe that the CCC and the administrative virtual organization supporting it, researching it, and evaluating it, were a metacommunity.

The Youth probably viewed the community as 40 Youth, 7 adults, and 3 administrators. But like actors unaware of their performances in a play, there was a whole support system of evaluators, curriculum designers, online webspace designers, and builders. Had you asked what predominated the Mentors' "culture" day to day, you would not have heard about their participation in WSU graduate school, you would have heard them talk about CCC as their primary cultural experience. The WSU vPDS management team had similar experiences, belonging more to the CCC project than their home cultures. This suggests that they were involved in a metacommunity.

The distinction we have made about transactional partnerships and metacommunities is that participants are in neither partner's home culture, nor are they in a brand new organization. They are straddling two communities. As this balancing act is maintained, it would be good to remember that during a transformational partnership you might need to spend some time/resources up front to make the metacommunity, outside the client-provider, contracted interaction. By making and endorsing boundary-less communications, you need not be driven into compromised practices.

Two things will enhance community; (1) active creation and attention to community through technological enhancement and, (2) dedicated, endorsed changes in the partnership culture.

These issues are sometime illuminated by the limits of the partnership involved. In our case, foster families didn't come in, the Board of Trustees didn't come in when invited. Also, other kids didn't feel excluded by not being able to come in. These limits describe the edges of our partnership and the limits of our particular metacommunity.

Enrich Collaboration

We offer up this metacommunity hypothesis, because we think the intellectual tools and vocabulary of online community creation fail to recognize important features of a spatially dispersed, non-vertical, non-horizontal, flattened hierarchical, community which is distinctly different from the local culture and local community. We don't need jargon, but sometimes we do need a new knowledge label. If there is such as thing as a metacommunity, then active and knowledgeable entry of partners into this type of relationship could enrich collaboration.

Another youth reflected on their use of the technology for a college search. *"CCC really influenced my career decision. I went from hating computers to loving them. The college project helped me go to web sites and see pictures of the colleges and learn about their programs. I can now use the scholarship tables, the online essays and applications."*

The dual elements of enhanced technology and elevated practices combine to allow fruitful interactions.

An interesting test of these enriched collaborations occurred during a suspected crises involving one of the Youth. Information moved very quickly through the natural communication channels without relying on the formal communication diagram or protocols.

Link Together Research, Teaching, And Public Service

Little advances this argument more than John Emerson's summary statement about the Casey-WSU partnership and the CCC's use of technology to further the agendas of Research, Teaching, and Public Service. His statement provides an interesting context and summary of this partnership and conclusion to this work.

John Emerson

The Casey Family Program's commitment to exploring how technology might play a significant role in preparing youth in foster care to take their rightful place as contributing members of their communities is exemplified in its 1995-2000 Strategic Plan, *"Building Toward A New Century"* (The Casey Family Program, 1995). Goal 13 states: "By the year 2000 improved technological connections among Casey staff, foster parents, youth, and the communities in which they live and work will be an integral part of Casey life, yielding better mutual understanding, increased access to resources and information, more targeted work, and improved collaboration". Providing leadership to Casey communities in the uses of technology for the improvement of services to youth and the enhancement of communication translated into a variety of initiatives by Casey divisions and the organization as a whole.

Several assumptions about how best to deliver quality long-term care to foster youth and families while preparing them to enjoy a high quality of life in an ever-increasing technological world grounded Casey's efforts. Among these were:

- Enriched environments to maximize their emotional, physical, intellectual, and spiritual potential
- Thoughtfully planned educational and vocational opportunities that allow each child to develop at their own pace
- To grasp the implications and acquire the disciplines necessary to function as citizens of the world

Information and technology are understood as central to achieving these outcomes. Being able to access the knowledge developed in other settings and engaging others in conversations about how this information might be best utilized to achieve personally fulfilling goals in seen as critical for finding success and satisfaction in the technological age. For at-risk youth who find themselves in long term foster care, technological advancements and related skill attainment offer a highly effective opportunity to make important connections to their peers, communities and the world. Because of their special status highlighted by instability and learning deficiencies, students in the foster care system too often find themselves left out of innovative educational advances, especially technologically focused innovations. *"Casey Cougar Camp"* provided Casey and its partner, Washington State University, with a unique opportunity to connect a group of at-risk youth distributed across the country and see what kind of a community and learning might result.

After carefully examining the many challenges and successes of this innovative online community effort, *The Casey Family Program* is encouraged that this and other developing technologies can play an important role in providing youth, their families, support staff and community partners with an effective means to help achieve greater independence. We are currently proceeding with a follow-up project to provide several hundred of our families with laptop computers and Internet connections. This will enable them to better communicate with the professional support staff, school personnel, and most importantly, with each other. The promise of online communities and improved technological learning opportunities to promote educational, career, living, social and leisure outcomes for a population that has traditionally experienced very low levels of independence will continue to be actively explored by *The Casey Family Program* in collaboration with community partners.

Full community integration, hopes for the future, independent living, educational attainment, career success and making satisfying connections. These are the outcomes that *The Casey Family Program* values for foster youth everywhere. The technological innovations explored through *"Casey Cougar Camp"* hold great promise to enhance the lives of youths who for too long have found themselves at the fringes of our communities.

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Abstract

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