

We Shared the Same Chapter: Collaboration, Learning, and Transformation from the 2008 Subsistence, the Environment, and Community Well-Being Native Youth Exchange in Old Harbor, Alaska Project

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On a small island belonging to the Alutiiq people of Old Harbor, 11 people sat around a campfire. Two community leaders, a nonprofit organizer, an academic scholar, a native filmmaker, and six young people from the Indian reservation of Taos Pueblo in New Mexico gathered after a day of interacting with Old Harbor residents—fishing, hunting and dressing a deer, and carving and cooking the food we had caught. As the fire burned late into the night, we talked about what brought us to this island and what issues we face in our lives. We discussed substance abuse and the early passing of young people from Old Harbor and Taos Pueblo in substance- or violence-related incidents. We talked about environmental issues that our communities face as well as the significance of cultural practices. We all reflected on the directions we hoped to go in our lives following this program. In this remote and culturally significant location, a transformational dialogue emerged among us in a way that we never could have anticipated. As the fire faded to a few lingering embers, Teacon Simeonoff, the program leader from the community of Old Harbor, looked around the group and said: We all have a story and sometimes we share the same chapters.

Introduction

Calls for outreach and participatory elements to academic research have been increasing (Barker, 2004; Paton, 2006; Sandmann, 2008). In response to criticisms about the uneven power relations in academic research, members of the academy have developed an array of innovative outreach and participatory programs that allow communities and individuals to benefit from, and have meaningful interactions with, the researchers who study them (e.g., Macaulay, Commanda, Freeman, Gibson, McCabe, Robbins, & Twonig, 1999; Stewart, 2005). Outreach and engagement activities from the academy are important because they allow a break from the paradigm of researchers extracting information from study subjects (Conway, 2006; Roper & Hirth, 2005). These activities also provide the setting for new and different kinds of dialogue and

learning among researchers, activists, and the communities with whom they engage (Brown, Reed, Bates, Knaggs, Casey, & Barnes, 2006; Nagar & Farh, 2003).

Young people ages 16–21 are at an important life stage. They face critical questions about substance abuse and life choices, and are beginning to decide how they want to shape their lives and enter the world. Youth in this age group, particularly those who come from at-risk backgrounds, are often overlooked in academic outreach programs because they can be difficult to engage (Camino, 2005). In many cases, they are not receptive to traditional forms of academic outreach (e.g., lectures, group activities, and minutely planned training sessions) (Post & Little, 2005).

We use the in-the-field example of an indigenous youth intercultural exchange program that we organized in the summer of 2008 to describe how collaboration and a structure focused on multiple kinds of learning contributed to a meaningful and transformative engagement experience for a group of American Indian youth of this age group. The 2008 Subsistence, the Environment, and Community Well-Being Native Youth Exchange in Old Harbor, Alaska Project was formed to develop a dialogue among Native youth about critical issues facing American Indian communities as well as the globe. The program was organized through collaborations between academic (University of Minnesota), non-profit (Movimiento¹), and community-based (Taos Pueblo and Old Harbor) organizers. The project was based in the Alaska Native village of Old Harbor, an isolated fishing community on Kodiak Island. Six at-risk Native youth (ages 16–20) from Taos Pueblo, New Mexico, flew to the village of Old Harbor to meet Old Harbor youth for 10 days of conversation, work, camping, and experiential learning.

In this reflective essay, we describe the unique collaborations and program design that facilitated meaningful engagement with young adults from this age group. We then conduct an analysis of the discourse that took place during the 10-day program to describe the types of reactions, learning, and reflection among participants and coleaders. Next, we explore the long-term outcomes of the program by analyzing recorded notes, interviews, and conversations that transpired more than 6 months after the program ended. To use the words of coleader Teacon Simeonoff, we trace what happened when for 10 days academics, nonprofit leaders, community organizers, and young people shared the same “chapter.” We then examine how that experience was integrated into each of our unique “stories” when we returned to our distinct—yet connected—lives.

Theory

Since this was a collaborative project with several partners, the theory guiding the design and format of the outreach program came from a number of different places, including academic, non-profit, and community-based sources.

Academic

In the design of this program, we drew from recent conceptions of university engagement as a collaborative process that involves multidirectional forms of learning and teaching (*Brown et al., 2006; Conway, 2006; Roper & Hirth, 2006; Sandmann, 2008; Weerts, 2005*). These forms of engagement have arisen in response to Foucauldian frameworks that take seriously questions of knowledge and power (*Burchell, Gordon, & Miller, 1991*). Traditional expert-based approaches to service, in which university representatives teach academic information to the public, can reproduce power relationships that privilege Western knowledge, and can fail to take seriously the knowledge and viewpoints of the communities with which they seek to engage (*Weerts, 2005*). With these conceptions of engagement in mind, we worked to develop an outreach program that resulted from the collaborative organizing efforts of academic, nonprofit, and community partners. In addition, we designed the structure of the program such that participant voices would be taken seriously and could drive the outcomes of the program.

Since our program contained a strong environmental component, its structure was also influenced by recent ideas in environmental education and human ecology. Traditional forms of environmental education have come under criticism for advocating a Western, science-based understanding of the natural world that is not relatable or open to alternate understandings of the environment (*Cole, 2007*). Increasingly, research has demonstrated that understandings of the environment are culturally and historically contingent (*Castree & Braun, 2001*). Academics in the field of environmental studies have begun to focus on the significance of local or traditional/indigenous forms of environmental information and have begun to stress the important linkages between social and ecological systems (*Berkes, Colding, & Folke, 2000; Berkes & Folke, 2000*). With these concepts in mind, formulations of environmental education, from which we draw, have moved toward more place-based approaches that are inclusive of multiple forms of environmental expertise and that focus on the important social and cultural context of the participants (*Cole, 2007*).

Nonprofit

Within the nonprofit sector, organizational leaders have increasingly recognized the importance of streamlined collaboration with other nonprofits, community organizations, and businesses. Particularly in times of financial shortage, nonprofits must form mutually beneficial partnerships that avoid duplication and demonstrate to funders that their resources are being used innovatively and efficiently. While it is common for nonprofits to partner with each other, it is rarer for a collaboration to emerge between a nonprofit, a community-based organization, and an academic entity. The 2008 Subsistence, the Environment, and Community Well-Being Native Youth Exchange in Old Harbor, Alaska Project is thus an example of pioneering leadership and collaboration involving, and extending beyond, the nonprofit sector.

We draw from the participating nonprofit's theories about youth outreach. *Movimiento* was created with a simple yet relatively new concept in the nonprofit world—that the youth it serves are themselves the best at defining what would most enrich and benefit their lives. *Movimiento*'s programs, including this one, are therefore dictated by what youth say they most want: respect, good mentorship, a chance to explore the world, meaningful work, and a hopeful future.

Community-Based

Many of the ideas and much of the theory behind the design of this outreach program came from experiences of leaders from both participating communities: Old Harbor and Taos Pueblo. We define community-based theory as ideas related to program design that are derived from the direct experience of individuals living within the communities. Local leaders advocated that any outreach program involving these two indigenous communities must be culturally relevant. It should provide opportunity for cross-cultural engagement and education rather than relying on lectures and teaching from academic counterparts. In addition, community partners stressed the inclusion of subsistence activities (fishing, hunting, gathering, and carving) as a significant part of the program, as they felt these subsistence and cultural practices were linked with indigenous community well-being. Teacon Simeonoff, the Old Harbor-based organizer, offered potential activities and camping locations based on his experiences running the Old Harbor summer cultural camps. Through his years working with the cultural camps, he knew which activities were effective, and had

an understanding of the logistics and planning necessary to make the camp operational. Community-based organizers also provided the group with place-based teaching about the experiences of both communities.

Program Elements

Implementation of the program required communication and coordination among the partners, communities, and youth participating in the exchange. Through this collaboration we developed a set of program goals and activities. This section provides background on some key elements of the 2008 Native Youth Exchange Project.

Participating Communities

Old Harbor, Alaska, is an Alutiiq community on Kodiak Island. The village is accessible only by boat or aircraft and has a population of 237. Old Harbor has traditionally been a fishing community, with residents involved in subsistence, commercial, and sport fishing activities. With a recent decline in commercial fishing participation, many young people in Old Harbor feel they have few options (Carothers, 2008). Youth from Old Harbor face issues related to substance abuse. In June 2008, two months prior to the exchange program, Old Harbor experienced the tragic death of a teenager in an alcohol-related accident. It was our hope that youth from Old Harbor could get involved in discussions and activities with the visiting group from Taos Pueblo as an outlet to reflect on some of the difficulties they face.

Taos Pueblo is an Indian reservation adjacent to the northern New Mexico community of Taos. Over 1,900 Taos Indians occupy Taos Pueblo lands, which extend for more than 99,000 acres. Taos Pueblo has a distinct religion and tribal government consisting of a governor and a War Chief (Taos Pueblo Tourism Office, 2008). Young people at Taos Pueblo experience many of the same challenges as youth from Old Harbor, including youth suicide, accidental death, alcoholism, and a sense that there is not anything to do. The Native youth exchange to Old Harbor became a means for Taos Pueblo youth to express and discuss their challenges and strengths.

Program Goals

The goal of the program was to provide a setting for youth from Taos Pueblo and Old Harbor to have a transformative experience. By this we mean an experience that they could take back with them,

empowering them to engage more actively in their daily lives, with new capacities for reflection and inspiration. In an interview, coleader Daniela Di Piero described the goals in this way: “Most of the young people on this trip have gone through incredibly difficult things in their lives; and they’ve really come a long way already; and I’m just hoping that having this little bit of time to have this kind of experience will help continue to lift them from the really heavy stuff” (*personal communication, August 10, 2008*). As a result of the program, we hoped that participants would think more deeply about their relationship to harmful substances and about the future directions of their lives. To achieve this, it was necessary to develop a setting for exchange, reflection, and revelation.

Program Activities

We ran the program through a concept of emergence. That is, we tried to provide a setting and the tools that would enable certain kinds of discussion and activities to emerge. This “emergence” approach attempted to eschew an expert-driven model of outreach in favor of one involving multidirectional teaching and learning. We provided the participants with the necessary tools to begin discussions and learning. We introduced Taos participants to youth from Old Harbor, and provided carving, beading, fishing, and hunting opportunities. We gave them access to academic researchers with knowledge about environmental issues in the region, and provided them with maps of the area to enable discussion about regional issues. Finally, we gathered as a group nightly to participate in games and discussion. These tools were made available and the group was encouraged to participate, but how the tools were used and what they meant was decided upon by those involved. This led to new kinds of activities and dialogues that we could not have anticipated.

The first 6 days of the program took place on a campsite on an island across the bay from the village of Old Harbor. The campsite was established by the Old Harbor Tribal Council and is the location of the village’s summer culture camp, which Teacon Simeonoff helps to run. To get to the camp, we needed to cross the bay in a small skiff. It provided a secure place that we knew was substance-free and where participants and organizers did not have access to television and other electronic devices that could have distracted from meaningful participation.

The activities at the camp included subsistence hunting and fishing, berry picking, cooking, sea kayaking, carving and beading,

nightly group conversations, and map-based discussions about the region. In total, 17 people from Old Harbor visited or stayed at the camp. In addition, two young men came to camp in their skiffs and took several participants on fishing excursions. For the final 2 days of the program, we relocated the group of Taos Pueblo youth to the village of Old Harbor. During their time in the village, they met and interacted with village elders, participated in village activities such as basketball and bingo, and developed a better sense of Old Harbor village life.

Ethnography of the Program

We analyzed field notes, interviews, and recorded conversations to explore the discourse utilized by organizers and participants over the course of the program. Research was conducted with IRB approval from University of Minnesota for a broader project that included both socio-cultural research in Old Harbor and the evaluation of this outreach program (*University of Minnesota IRB Study Number: 0605P85866*). Margaret Faraday, a burgeoning filmmaker, traveled with the group to film a documentary about the experience of the exchange. Many interviews were conducted in conjunction with the filming for this documentary. The film titled *Alaska Through Taos*, directed, written and produced by Margaret Faraday was released in April 2009.

We uploaded notes and transcribed materials from the program into the social science coding software Atlas.ti (2009). These materials were coded based on the categories of “reactions,” “learning,” and “reflection.” We then observed the different kinds of themes or patterns that emerged in each of those categories. We had more extensive interviews with the participants from Taos Pueblo, so our description will focus on those young people. We will, however, fill in with notes from observations of and conversations with Old Harbor young people when possible.

Reactions

Two kinds of reactions dominated the group’s discourse about their responses to traveling to Old Harbor: excitement over getting to travel to a new and exotic place; and responses to the similarities and differences between the community of Old Harbor and their own.

Some of the first reactions of the participants from Taos Pueblo related to the wonder of traveling to and being in a completely different place. Prior to the trip, few of them had done much

traveling outside New Mexico. To them, the trip to Old Harbor, which included three flights within the continental United States, one flight on a smaller plane to Kodiak Island, and a final flight on a 10-seat bush plane to the fishing village, was both exhausting and awe-inspiring. One participant said: “Well it took us forever to get out here but we’re finally out here and I gotta say it’s amazingly beautiful” (*personal communication, August 7, 2008*). Many commented on the beauty of the Kodiak Island setting as well as relished the new activities they attempted for the first time: kayaking, fishing for salmon, seeing puffins, and sewing seal skins. In this context, traveling to Alaska was “exciting and fun” (*personal communication, August 10, 2008*).

As soon as we arrived at the village, Taos Pueblo young people sought out a few young men from Old Harbor who were sitting at the village dock. Right away, they engaged in serious conversation, and began to learn about life in this distant community. In interviews during the trip, Taos Pueblo young people began to reflect on the similarities between Old Harbor and their reservation community back in New Mexico. One participant made a comment about the hospitality of Old Harbor:

It’s just welcoming when people from here treat you really good and tell you hello, welcome, come into my home. It’s just the way of Native people I guess. Meeting one Native to another. Feels good. It feels like, like you’re all part one, you’re all of one people. And that’s how it should be from now on to days to days (*personal communication, August 9, 2008*).

While on the dock, the young people also talked about some of the more difficult problems that both communities face. They engaged in a conversation about the young man from Old Harbor who passed away in an alcohol-related incident. Taos Pueblo youth shared stories of losing friends and relatives under similar circumstances. One Taos Pueblo participant said, “We’re just kind of mingling with the people because they’re having the same kind of issues that we’re having back home with young people and substance abuse and a lot of the hardships that we’re going through” (*personal communication, August 7, 2008*). Teacon Simeonoff told the Taos Pueblo participants that these conversations were important for Old Harbor young people too. He told the Taos youths: “To hear that some of those older teens [from Old Harbor] want to come out here to visit you guys is um, like a

big step forward in the prevention program” (*personal communication, August 8, 2008*).

We believe that both of these initial reactions provided important foundations for the experience of the trip. The exoticness of the location offered a setting that forced participants out of their element, and into a space where they could break from normal patterns and begin to reflect. The exchange aspect gave participants from Taos a window to view issues they face from a new vantage point—to see from the outside how young people from another community experience and deal with very similar problems.

This exchange aspect was also important for young people from Old Harbor who participated in the program. Living in a remote fishing village accessible only by boat or small plane, they can easily feel alone in the problems they face. Being able to interact, share stories, and observe commonalities with an American Indian community from so far away, gave these young people a chance to feel less isolated in their experiences. Comments from both Taos Pueblo and Old Harbor youth suggest that the program elicited new feelings of Native solidarity, like they are all “part one.” These kinds of realizations and connections can be an important source of strength as participants move forward in their lives.

Learning

In our program analysis, we found that learning was multidirectional and took place in many different settings. We observed three distinct kinds of learning: participants learning from coleaders; participants from Taos Pueblo and Old Harbor learning from each other; and coleaders learning from participants.

Our program featured conventional teaching and learning in which coleaders led discussions and activities aimed at teaching young people about particular subjects, activities, or experiences. Teacon Simeonoff from Old Harbor was excited to teach young people about traditional activities. He said: “[This is] our first time having people from off island or even out of state. A great experience for me to get a chance to really teach somebody how to do some traditional hunting and fishing” (*personal communication, August 9, 2008*). He showed the Taos Pueblo young people and other coleaders hunting, fishing, carving, and music-making techniques. He also described the history of Kodiak Island and the Alutiiq villages.

Flowers Espinoza took the opportunity to teach young people from her own community of Taos Pueblo about “[her] own sobriety

and [her] challenges that [she's] had to face" (*personal communication, August 10, 2008*). Around the campfire and in small-group discussions, she talked with participants about difficulties and benefits of her decision to lead a sober lifestyle. Laurie Richmond, from academia, spent time discussing some of the political and ecological challenges that this region of Alaska faces. In small-group sessions over maps of Kodiak Island, she taught participants from Taos Pueblo about the impacts of climate change on the region, the effects of the Exxon Valdez oil spill, the status of fish stocks in the area, and how changes to the political structure of the regional fisheries have affected Alaska Native fishing communities.

Young people from Taos Pueblo and Old Harbor also had the chance to learn from one another. In small unstructured conversations, they taught each other how they have related to issues they face. They also taught each other about regional ecology. While on the Old Harbor dock, a young person from Old Harbor showed the Taos Pueblo young people a halibut that he had just caught. He then proceeded to dissect the fish and talk about its biology, opening the stomach to show the young people the types of food that halibut eat. Another young man from Old Harbor came over to the camp and took some of the Taos Pueblo participants fishing in his skiff. He taught them fishing techniques, and showed them places to catch different kinds of fish. At the end of the trip, two Taos Pueblo participants wondered to each other: "I bet if we lived here we'd have our own skiffs too."

Our analysis shows that learning also happened in another direction. Participants taught the coleaders a number of important concepts. When Teacon began sitting and carving with young people from Taos Pueblo, they shared techniques with one another. Some of the young men had already done extensive carving and they passed their ideas on to Teacon. In a unique hybrid of techniques, one Taos Pueblo young person combined Teacon's methods with his own carving ideas to carve himself a bone nose ring. The young men presented Teacon with a traditional Taos Pueblo flute. They taught him about songs and playing styles from their region. The Taos Pueblo participants also shared some of their ideas for dressing a deer when they worked with the coleaders to skin and carve a deer that was caught during a morning hunt.

In addition to passing along skills, the young people taught the trip leaders much about their lives and the unique challenges they face. The structure of the program provided spaces for leaders to actively listen to, and learn from, young people from Old Harbor and Taos Pueblo. For Laurie Richmond, learning about the needs

and challenges of people in Old Harbor from this important but often overlooked generation provided important additions to her research about the experiences of the fishing community. Teacon Simeonoff, who works for Old Harbor's prevention program, indicated that prior to this experience, he felt that the 16–21 age group was hard to connect with because it is “really hard to try to help somebody that is not willing to accept help” (*personal communication, August 8, 2008*). Participating in the program and spending time with these young people helped him contemplate better ways to reach out to young adults from Old Harbor. Daniela Di Piero learned about some of the difficulties of the youths' home lives and struggles with the drug court system. This will enable her to shift the design of her nonprofit organization to better react to the unique needs of the young people it serves.

Reflection

Meaningful reflection cannot be forced. In planning, we hoped to develop a structure to allow reflection by participants. When we sat around the campfire in the anecdote recounted at the beginning of this article, one of the coleaders suggested that everybody speak about a reaction to their experience on the trip. Instead of presenting one superficial reaction, as we went around the circle, the Taos Pueblo young people, unprompted, began to delve into some of the most difficult issues that they were facing in their lives. They talked in depth about struggles with drug and alcohol addiction, deaths of friends, the difficulties of living in two very different cultures, concerns for the future, and the meanings of this program. We observed several common themes in the type of reflection that took place among participants and coleaders both during this campfire discussion and throughout the program.

Many of the participants from Taos Pueblo expressed that prior to coming on this trip they were in a bad state—either partying too much or falling away from the directions they hoped to take their lives. One participant said:

I can relate to what she was talking about, that feeling of wasted time, just wasting away, you can feel it, it's an awful feeling. That's how I was feeling before I came out here. I just kind of said . . . you know, I'm not gonna do nothing. I'm just gonna be like everybody else. I'm just gonna be, just living the highlife. Whatever. You know, rez life (*personal communication, August 8, 2008*).

Another participant said: “I think I’m falling out of it lately, not doing much, but living every weekend. It’s kind of getting to be a real bad habit.” (*personal communication, August 8, 2008*). Two other participants expressed similar sentiments, that before the trip they had fallen into bad patterns from which they hoped to break.

Much of the discussion among the participants and coleaders included references to the importance of culture as a source of strength. One participant from Taos Pueblo discussed how important it was for him to become involved in his own Native religion. He said, “I was initiated, started dancing and doing all the activities that we do. That kind of—that opened my eyes a lot, and I really appreciated being who I am. Being Indian” (*personal communication, August 8, 2008*). Flowers Espinoza, the coleader from the community of Taos Pueblo, shared her feelings about the incredible power and opportunity of the Taos Pueblo culture and religion:

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“What we have, like some of the wisdom . . . ancient wisdom, that’s I mean, people all over, like scholars, people that are trying to achieve Ph.D.s, that’s what they’re trying to achieve . . . I hope that like you see that” (*personal communication, August 8, 2008*). In this

quote she expressed her feelings that Taos Pueblo tribal members possess an inherent wisdom about the world that is so valuable that scholars and academics are attempting to conduct research to attain that same level of wisdom. Coleaders and participants also talked about the strength gained from involvement in material cultural practices, in “creating something that’s beautiful, making something with [your] hands” (*D. Di Piero, personal communication, August 10, 2008*).

Participants also reflected on how the specific experience of a travel-based exchange program provided them with an important “break” from their home lives as well as a time to take stock and get “back on track.” One young man said, “I don’t want to say this was like an escape, but in some ways it was. I was going through some pretty hard times, and I just needed to get away and get my head screwed on back straight and this was the perfect chance to do that” (*personal communication, August 9, 2008*). A Taos Pueblo participant said that the trip gave her an opportunity to “take a look inside of yourself and start to realize things that you never would realize if

you were in the same position like being home all the time. It kind of makes you a little bit unselfish, a little bit more 'cause it takes you out of your element and puts you into something so new and fresh, and it just helps you grow—helps me grow” (*personal communication, August 10, 2008*). One young man said that after the program he will “hopefully go home and not fall into the same trap,” (*personal communication, August 8, 2008*) expressing a desire to change his life as a result of this experience, but also recognizing how difficult his life patterns will be to break.

Another common theme among different kinds of participant reflection, was a feeling of the importance of a group—or “energy within a group”—and a newfound desire to help others. Near the end of the trip, participants referred to each other as “brothers and sisters.” One young woman commented that this group experience gave her connections with others and a chance “to have a voice,” both of which “makes things easier,” so she does not have to “get so low.” Many also expressed how, as a group interacting with young people from Old Harbor, they discovered an impetus to “reach out” to others. One Taos Pueblo young person expressed it in this way:

It's huge coming out here and seeing that these young people here have the same problems that [we have] back home. This is where it starts, just little, you know like a group like this but, you know, you see that there is people out there that you know, they're not the only ones going through it. We can come out and help them out by just talking to 'em about it (*personal communication, August 10, 2008*).

Outcomes and Transformation

When you set goals as elusive as hoping to achieve a “transformative experience” for engagement program participants, it can be difficult to measure whether success was realized. Moreover, with participants that come from difficult home situations, it is important not to have unrealistic expectations about the potential impacts of an outreach program. We believe that follow-up conversations and involvement with program participants are important, in order both to achieve transformation among participants and leaders, and to understand its nature. Daniela Di Piero and Flowers Espinoza remained in Taos following the program, and had important follow-up conversations and interactions with participants. They continue to work with the young people

on a number of different activities. Laurie Richmond and Teacon Simeonoff remained in Old Harbor after the program, where they observed and conversed with Old Harbor youth about their experiences.

Most prominently, on April 9, 2009, seven months following the Alaska trip, we held a follow-up event in Taos, New Mexico. At the event, Taos Pueblo participants discussed their experiences and presented the documentary *Alaska Through Taos* to the Taos community. Over 100 Taos community members, including family and friends of the participants and Taos Pueblo leaders, attended the event. We used transcripts from the speeches that participants and coleaders made to the community along with notes from continued conversations with and observations of participants to describe the ways that participants and leaders were transformed by this engagement program. We believe that dialogue, statements, and behavior of the participants indicate that the experience of the program was transformative and had a lasting impact.

Several months after the program, one participant discussed the ways that she had incorporated the experience into her home life. She said that learning some of the environmental challenges Old Harbor faced, such as those from the Exxon Valdez oil spill, “opened my eyes to issues, to environmental issues.” She said that learning about the importance of these kinds of issues “made me see who I was going so far away from” and made her want to “finish school.” These kinds of comments suggest that the trip has led her to make meaningful changes in the path of her life. Participants also talked about how the experience brought them closer together, which gave them a new network of people to rely on when they returned home. Referring to the conversation highlighted at the beginning of the article, one participant said:

There was one time we were sitting around the campfire and just—I guess you could say it was like a therapy session in a way except you were talking with all your friends and not some strange lady. But just doing that, and expressing what you have inside—a letting go all of your troubles, and it really brought all of us closer together. You know we’re not just friends now, I’d consider all of these people, you know, brothers and sisters (*personal communication, April 9, 2009*).

Participants also discussed how the relationships, discussions, and reflections they experienced during the program helped them

to develop a new set of skills to deal with challenges they faced at home. One younger participant stated that there were “tools that we discovered there that we didn’t know we had,” which could also be used to help out friends and family who “didn’t make it on the trip.” This statement expresses two things. First, the trip led participants to develop new life-tools for dealing with complicated home issues. Second, the transformations and tools developed on the trip could be extended beyond the individuals who embarked on the trip. They were able to bring their experiences and learning home to pass on to family and friends.

Laurie Richmond, a coleader situated in Old Harbor, also described some of the changes that she observed in Old Harbor young people who participated in the program. She said, “I know a lot of these kids [from Old Harbor] had sort of retreated and after these guys [from Taos] left, kids that I had not seen go fishing and hunting were actively out, were helping the elders, were starting to reengage in their life.” She observed positive changes in the actions and attitudes of Old Harbor young people in response to interactions with the Taos visitors. In follow-up conversations, we learned that following the program, two young people from Taos and one person from Old Harbor had significantly reduced their use of, and reliance on, harmful substances.

Transformation was not limited to the young people. At the April 9th event, Laurie said, “I think a lot of time we might talk about these transformative experiences in terms of the young people. But I think that Flowers, Daniela, and I can all attest that this was an incredibly transformative experience for us” (*personal communication, April 9, 2009*). Leaders talked about developing a newfound understanding for young people, and the “grace” and “tenacity” with which they face an array of challenges. One leader said, “I didn’t expect that it would become like a friendship, the way that it really was” (*L. Richmond, personal communication, April 9, 2009*). All leaders discussed how they had not only become proud of the young people who came on the trip, but that their experiences gave them new insights into the experiences of young people around them as

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well as a network of young friends to draw from as they face new challenges in their lives.

Conclusions

Based on our experiences with this exchange, we have contemplated ways that we might improve upon and extend our program activities. We found that a loose programmatic structure was effective at giving participants the space to reflect and develop their own visions for the program. After talking to some of the young participants, however, we learned that they actually would have been open to more structured teaching and discussions about important issues in the region. They were not as averse to more lecture-based styles of engagement as we had anticipated. If we repeat the program, we will likely work to schedule more structured activities and lectures.

We also observed that the transformation benefits of the program extended much more to the young people who traveled from Taos Pueblo than to those from Old Harbor. By traveling to a new place, young people from Taos Pueblo were forced out of their element, and given a break from their home lives. Later, they had the opportunity to bring these experiences home, and share them with their community. Young people from Old Harbor did not have the same opportunity. We are therefore working on completing the circle of the exchange by arranging for several young people from Old Harbor to travel to Taos Pueblo to engage in a similar exchange experience.

We believe that this outreach case study can provide much insight to other academics and community leaders looking to work with young people in the age range 16–21. We believe the program contains specific elements that contributed to its success in engaging and transforming troubled teens.

Collaboration was essential to the success of this project. Academic, nonprofit, and community-based leaders all provided key contributions. It was important to work with nonprofit and community-based individuals who have developed a relationship and trust with the young people, and are involved with them on a continual basis. Trust was essential for real, open engagement from the participants. Continued involvement of community and nonprofit leaders was important to ensure that reflection and transformation was maintained after the program ended. The *follow-up* presentation where participants presented the documentary film about the exchange (*Alaska Through Taos*) and talked about the

program to family and friends was important for solidifying the positive effects of the exchange.

We believe that the *small scale* of the program was integral to its success. While there is often pressure from funders and foundations to reach out to increasing numbers of individuals, we stress the importance of small-scale engagement. Because only six young people from the community of Taos Pueblo participated in the program, we were able to develop a level of trust, support, and rapport that would not have been possible in a larger group. This contributed to the diverse and meaningful kinds of reflection and learning that made transformation possible.

Finally, we feel that *exchange* can be a very effective engagement strategy with young people from this age group. Daniela Di Piero has developed exchange programs and service-learning projects as significant components of her nonprofit's young adult transformation and rehabilitation activities. Comments from participants continually highlighted the significance of being in a different place to act as a break, to open their eyes to the world, and to reflect on their lives in a comparative way.

With all the constraints of an academic career, it might be difficult for individual researchers to imagine ways to meaningfully engage with the communities in which they work. It is especially difficult to develop strategies to connect with young adults from difficult home backgrounds. This Native Youth Exchange program shows that through collaboration with a small number of participants, this type of engagement is realistic and can have meaningful impacts on young people who face difficult challenges. Also, in these types of engagement activities, learning and transformation need not be limited to the young participants. It can also extend to the coleaders. In our case, it extended to everyone who took part in this unique shared "chapter." As one coleader put it: "This trip is just a thread that has tied us all together, and I think that no matter where we go, we'll always sort of know and have this connection with one another."

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the Old Harbor Tribal Council for their assistance in the implementation of this program. The council provided access to their campgrounds as well as supplies for running the program. The Old Harbor Native Corporation graciously gave us permission to camp, hunt, and fish on their lands. We are grateful to Old Harbor community members Zora Inga, Melissa Burns, and Wesley Christiansen Jr., who volunteered their time to assist with the program. We would like to

thank independent filmmaker Margaret Faraday for filming the program, and encouraging conversations and growth that were key components of the project's success. We also thank the Taos Pueblo Governor's and War Chief's Offices, tribal elders, participants' parents, and Oo-oo-nah Arts Center for their support of the project. Funding for the exchange program was provided by the Morgan Family Foundation, Quail Roost Foundation, Pettus Foundation, Virginia W. Cabot Foundation, Oo-oo-nah Arts Center, and private donors Rogers-Richmond, Muirhead, Reinhorn, and Shroyer. Laurie Richmond's research is supported by funding from the National Science Foundation; the University of Minnesota Interdisciplinary Center for the Study of Global Change; and the University of Minnesota Consortium on Law and Values in Health, Environment and the Life Sciences. We would also like to thank George Spangler, Naheed Aftaab, and several anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful reviews of the manuscript.

Endnote

1. Movimiento is a youth-oriented nonprofit organization based in Taos, New Mexico. Movimiento's mission is to nourish a youth movement for learning and social change through local agriculture, social entrepreneurship, indigenous youth initiatives, and international solidarity work. Movimiento helps young people explore and connect with nature, meaningful work, indigenous ways, community, self-inquiry, and leadership. Movimiento empowers young people to imagine and implement creative responses to the challenges of our time, transmuting depression into purpose, conflict into fierceness, pain into compassion, and grief into wisdom.

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