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From Desert to Garden: Reconnecting Disconnected Youth

Linda Sandler, Judith A. Vandegrift, and Candace VerBruggen

Out of a forgotten patch of earth, at-risk teenagers cultivated a traditional Native American Yaqui garden. In the process, they transformed themselves as well.

Imagine the Sonoran desert of the Southwest. Dry, brown, crusted earth. A scattering of low scrub. The prickly thorns of an ocotillo cactus. The majestic silhouette of a saguaro.

In this desolate place, a transformation takes place. The earth is overturned and irrigated. A patterned mosaic of plants and walkways takes shape. What was once a neglected patch of ground is now a traditional Native American Yaqui garden. Children and tribal elders walk along the paths—admiring the beauty and “listening to the wind and Mother Earth.”

The transformation of the desert—and of the 13 Yaqui students who created the garden—was not accidental, but the result of an innovative educational program for at-risk youth. The Pascua Yaqui Educational Group Effort (PYEdge) combines intensive basic skills instruction with pre-employment skills training. The program is part of Arizona’s K–12 Serve America, which was created by federal legislation passed in 1990.¹ Serve America funds innovative programs that link schools with community agencies to involve school-age and out-of-school youth in volunteer service to their communities.

Giving Students an Edge

The program serves members of the Pascua Yaqui Tribe, who live on the Yaqui Reservation 12 miles outside of Tucson. Participants are among the

nearly one-third of reservation students who drop out of Tucson high schools each year. Some work toward a high school diploma; others seek a

GED or to reenter high school. These are young people who not only feel out of place in the traditional school system, but also lack roots in their own community.

A cornerstone of the program’s curriculum is its student service learning model, which incorporates preparation, action, and reflection activities (Duckenfield and Swanson 1992). Its developmental opportunities promote personal, social, and intellectual growth in addition to civic responsibility and career exploration.

children and youth—as a community problem. Next, they presented their project plan—to cultivate a traditional Yaqui garden project—to the tribal administration.

After receiving tribal approval, students participated in workshops and training conducted by Native Seed Search, a nonprofit organization working to preserve the traditional crops of the Southwest. The students’ garden project curriculum developed their cultural knowledge and integrated academic and vocational skills, and training as well.

In planning the garden, for example, students used their math skills to measure plant beds and walkways, to estimate materials and equipment needed, and to develop a business plan. To plant the garden, these young

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Through coursework, students identify and analyze community problems and needs. Then, as a group, they plan a project.

The Yaqui garden illustrates how the Pascua Yaqui Educational Group Effort helped one group of students better connect with their own culture, traditions, and beliefs. Of the 13 students, 2 were teen parents, 2 were youth offenders, and 1 youngster had a history of substance abuse. They identified a lack of cultural awareness—among themselves and other Yaqui

people learned horticultural skills, including how to prepare beds for a dry climate, plant low water crops, irrigate and fertilize the plants, and properly maintain a garden. They listened, spoke, researched, read, wrote about—and lived—the project.

At more than 10 workshops given by Native Americans, students learned about and were encouraged to reflect on the significance of the native garden in terms of Yaqui culture, tradition, and belief systems. To better connect with “Mother Earth,” some students went



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A student collects precipitation data in Vermejo Park, northeast New Mexico.

on a sunrise meditation walk, planned with tribal spiritual leaders.

Personal Success Stories

Examples of what these young people accomplished speak for themselves. Here are a few:

■ One student wrote an article for the *Sonoran Journal*—learning about writing and publishing while creating community awareness of the garden project.

■ Students presented a Yaqui storytelling session and garden tour for Head Start children. To prepare themselves as storytellers, they observed older tribal storytellers, then adapted Yaqui legends about the plant world for the children.

■ Students researched, wrote, and produced a trilingual coloring/activity book for Head Start students and other community youngsters. In the process, they drew pictures of plants from their garden, researching the English, Spanish, and Yaqui words for each plant name. Students not only produced a valuable community resource, but also participated in an entrepreneurial enterprise.

■ Students organized an Open Garden for the Yaqui community and other guests from Tucson. In addition to preparing and distributing invitation flyers, students developed a detailed map of the garden beds; hosted

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a coloring corner to display their coloring/activity book; and conducted guided tours of the Native Garden.

Moreover, all 13 former dropouts completed the academic goals set by the project, improved their basic skills performance on standardized measures of achievement, and participated in career development assessments. Three of the students received high school credit enabling them to return to school, and others made progress toward GED completion.

Did these so-called disenfranchised students become more connected to their community? Yes. By contributing to their community, they, in turn, began to think of themselves as community members with a stake in what happens.

As the project director said:

The students in this project aren't the type who sit on student council or belong to the newspaper club. In this alternative setting, however, these young people were able to risk taking part in organized group activities and experience the recognition, approval, and pride that results....

They also benefited greatly from the cultural and spiritual workshops, which enabled them to learn about and feel pride in being a member of the Yaqui Tribe. Having been part of a successful community service project ... students feel that they were given permission to consider other problems in their community, and were legitimized in speculating about potential solutions.

The personal narratives of individual students are the best testimony of the program's lasting effects. Take Frank, who was out of school for three years before enrolling in this project. During his dropout years, he was an active gang member. As part of the garden project, Frank drew many of the pictures in the student-produced coloring book, among other activities. Currently working toward his GED, Frank is also helping to renovate homes on the reservation, as a carpenter's apprentice in a program sponsored by the tribe.

Or, there is Vicky, who was out of school for two years before joining the program and working with the Head Start children as part of the garden project. Since receiving her GED, Vicky is on call as a teacher's aide in a local elementary school—in addition to working for the Pascua Yaqui tribe.

Documenting Success

Success stories like Frank's and Vicky's contribute to a widely held belief that community service helps

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young people, especially those at risk, to develop a personal stake in their community. As researchers

and practitioners, we explored the benefits of community service as part of a statewide evaluation of the Pascua Yaqui Educational Group Effort and other Arizona Serve America projects (Sandler and Vandegrift 1994).

To begin, we wanted to know whether or not at-risk youth really are more disenfranchised than their non-at-risk peers. First, we had to distinguish between at-risk and non-at-risk youth. We did so based on students' responses to an at-risk inventory² that we administered to 480 students from 13 sites involved in Arizona's Serve America programs before they participated in community service activities.

The 30 questions dealt with the presence, absence, or frequency of characteristics and behaviors associated with being at risk. Some questions asked about family composition (for example: Do you live in a single- or two-parent household? Are you a parent?). Some asked about living conditions (for example: Does your home have year-round utilities?). Other questions explored patterns of health, school attendance, and substance and alcohol use.

In addition to the inventory, students answered a questionnaire. The 35 multiple-choice questions examined students' history of, and attitudes toward, community involvement. For example, one set of questions asked about their engagement in community-oriented activities (Have you visited a sick friend or relative within the last six months?). Students also completed sentences with a phrase that best expressed their beliefs about community responsibilities (for example: Taking care of people who are having difficulty caring for themselves: (a) is everybody's responsibility, including

mine, or (b) is not my responsibility).

Correlating the two sets of scores from the survey and the questionnaire, we found that, not surprisingly, the more at-risk a student, the less connected to the community and vice versa. We then explored whether community service changed student attitudes for the better, especially for those considered at risk. The same students who answered the questionnaire prior to the program completed the instrument after their community service experience. We looked at pre- and post-test changes in students' scores on the measure of involvement-connectedness.

In 5 of the 13 projects we examined—including the Pascua Yaqui Educational Group Effort—student attitudes improved markedly toward their communities. Moreover, these attitudinal changes were even greater for highly at-risk students than for their less at-risk peers. That is, after the program, differences between highly and less at-risk students, in terms of their connectedness to their communities, became markedly less pronounced.

From Desert to Garden

The power of the Pascua Yaqui Educational Group Effort is that it is at once a dropout prevention program, an at-risk intervention program, a school-to-work transition program, and a program that connects students with their community. With renewed national interest in volunteer service and the continued focus on strategies that help *all* students learn, community service/service learning is one possible strategy to help students experience success.

As part of systemic reform, service

learning is of particular significance in addressing the education of at-risk students, for whom

more traditional educational strategies have been less than compelling. In making connections for students among education, communities, and work, these types of activities are both relevant and promising.

As a result of this particular program, more than the earth was transformed: 13 Yaqui teens were recast from dropouts to successful learners, from young people likely to use community services to those who provide services, from students who need help to those who help others. They reconnected with their community, and, along the way, learned skills to help them in the world of work. ■

¹Currently renamed "Learn and Serve America," these programs nationwide operate under the auspices of the Corporation for National and Community Service, and in Arizona through the Arizona Department of Education.

²The inventory was originally used in a four-year longitudinal study of at-risk students in Arizona. Responses to the inventory were found to be highly descriptive of students' success in school or at-risk status.

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