

**The Food Project**  
**A Follow-Up Study of Program Participants**

By  
Roblyn Anderson Brigham, Ph.D.  
Jennifer Nahas, M.M.H.S.

Brigham Nahas Research Associates

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Brigham Nahas Research Associate  
Two Waterman Rd.  
Cambridge, MA 02138  
617-868-6508 \* [www.bnra.net](http://www.bnra.net)

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## **Executive Summary**

The Food Project has completed its 16<sup>th</sup> year of providing unique experiences to youth through its Summer Youth Program (SYP), Academic Year Program (AYP) and the Internship Program. Each year, groups of youth from the city of Boston and surrounding communities come together to work on the land and in the communities of Lincoln and Roxbury. With high standards and expectations, diverse work crews, open communication, and thoughtful workshops and experiences, youth are offered a strong first job experience with the potential for significant personal growth.

To build on previous evaluation efforts to learn about The Food Project, Brigham Nahas Research Associates (BNRA) was asked to conduct an alumni follow-up study. This study was designed to explore the experience from the perspective of past participants and to identify perceived impacts of The Food Project on those who have worked with the organization intensely, namely those that engaged in the SYP plus the AYP, the Internship Program, or both.

This study involved in-depth interviews with 30 program alumni who were 14 or 15 years old when they started with The Food Project, and who were 18 to 24 years old at the time of the interview. The group represented a range of backgrounds and experiences, including males and females, youth from Boston as well as adjacent small cities and suburban communities, white youth, and young people of color. Some attended high schools that were diverse, while others were from schools and neighborhoods that were extremely segregated—both racially and economically. Their reflections about The Food Project experience and how it changed them form the cornerstone of the findings presented in this report. With the benefit of hindsight, their observations help us place The Food Project in the broader context of their lives, providing a rich picture of what the experience meant to them.

### **The Food Project Experience and Impacts**

When asked to describe The Food Project, those interviewed waxed nostalgic about their summer experience and the challenges of fieldwork—the heat, the bugs, the weeds, and the hard work, the bone-tired feelings at the end of the day—all of which were new experiences to most. The SYP made a considerable impression on everyone we spoke with, whether they loved it or hated it at the time. The summer was an entry to the Academic Year Program and the Internship program which offered more sustained and meaningful experiences with the organization, and significant personal growth opportunities for those who took advantage of them. Straight Talk, opportunities to develop new skills and the chance to truly experience diversity stood out as the most valuable aspects of the experience.

## Perceived Impacts

In the interviews, respondents were passionate about what they gained from being involved in The Food Project. They described in vivid detail the ways that The Food Project changed them and the impressions it made on their lives. We describe these impacts in six main categories:

- **Becoming a Worker:** From basic job skills and developing a work ethic to gaining managerial experience and finding a professional passion, those interviewed talked about how their experience at The Food Project set them on a positive trajectory into the work force. Further, The Food Project has had a considerable impact on the educational and career plans that the young people later pursue, influencing the fields they consider, as well as their perspective about how to work with others and the importance of finding meaning in their professional lives.
- **Leadership...The Food Project Way:** When asked whether The Food Project helped youth develop leadership skills, we heard a resounding “yes!” from all but four of those interviewed. Leadership is defined by this group in a way that reflects The Food Project approaches and values: A leader is a person who is respected, has a strong voice, can clearly communicate and present ideas, can listen even better, and who can bring disparate people together toward a common goal. Leadership is not a matter of assuming specific roles or of being in charge; it is facilitating greatness and exploring possibilities.
- **Experiencing, Appreciating, and Valuing Diversity:** There was a core group in the interviews for whom exposure to and learning to become comfortable with diversity was the most profound impact of The Food Project. This group was comprised mainly of those for whom diversity was a new experience. Overcoming a sense of nervousness coming into The Food Project and comfort coming out the other end was raised repeatedly. Even so, there remained a lot of frustration that the young people could not maintain lasting relationships or friendships with those they met through The Food Project.
- **Deepening Understanding of Social Issues:** Three out of four of those interviewed said that The Food Project made a significant impression on their understanding of social issues and problems. The experiences working in hunger-relief organizations and homeless shelters brought the complexity of social issues to light, and changed impressions of people in need. They developed a more realistic, comprehensive, and altruistic understanding of the homeless and of the circumstances that led them to the streets, and a clearer understanding of the depth of need in their community. Many came to The

Food Project with a concern for social justice and equity, and what they gained was an understanding of a food-related approach to addressing it.

- **Appreciating Food:** Those interviewed talked about expanding their diets to include more diverse foods, especially increasing the range of vegetables they would eat or try, and eating more non-processed, healthy foods in general. Many of those who did not prepare their own food believed that The Food Project changed their eating habits because they no longer eat fast food, or they eat much less of it than they used to.
- **Sustainable Agriculture:** Outcomes related to increasing youth’s knowledge about sustainable agriculture were the least frequently mentioned of these six, even though 62 percent said they gained and retained information about farming and were able to describe something they learned or do differently as a result. Most of the examples involved trying to buy local, and being aware of how far food travels to get to local markets, although many living in urban centers talked about how difficult it is to put this in practice.

## Concluding Comments

The Food Project encompasses the most important features that high-quality youth development programs share with caring staff, high expectations, strong leadership, and consistent program implementation. Tight alignment between activities and outcomes make each component worthwhile and meaningful.

While The Food Project shares common elements with many youth programs, three features set it apart.

- **The Food Project is a Phenomenal First Job:** The fact that The Food Project is the first formal, paid job for just about everyone—and that it is a high-quality, learning-rich experience—is extremely important. The work is “real” and the responsibilities are significant. Critical job skills are emphasized, responsibilities are clearly outlined, and feedback and constructive criticism from supervisors and peers is direct and consistent.

The job experience is a significant program strength, which can continue to be developed and expanded. It is important to take care during expansion to continue to make the work during AYP and the internships real and meaningful.

- **Experiencing Diversity -- Purposeful, Sustained, and Meaningful:** By providing an experience for youth from different backgrounds to interact in a sustained, meaningful, and authentic way, The Food Project is going beyond where most youth development programs tread. The Food Project embraces the friction it creates with its diverse work teams and challenging exercises; it is used to encourage personal growth and change.

The Food Project makes an extraordinary effort to encourage youth to think about and experience diversity. As such, these efforts should be leveraged to the fullest. We would urge the organization to strive to make the diversity elements—especially the workshops and trainings—cutting-edge to take advantage of the unique situation they create.

- **The Land as a Resource:** Last—but in many ways, foremost—The Food Project has an incredible resource in “the land.” It plays a pivotal role in making all elements so successful. Working on the land is challenging from the start for almost everyone who comes to The Food Project, leveling the playing field for diverse groups. It is on the land, working side-by-side—miserable at times, elated at others—that much of the bonding occurs and relationships form, both within and across groups of like and unlike crew members and leaders. The land provides a metaphor for youth, reflecting the many truths of their lives about the importance and value of hard work and effort.

The Food Project is a strong, mission-driven program whose alumni see it as a valuable part of their life experiences. It is hoped that the findings from this report will contribute to efforts to build on successes as the organization strives to have strong outcomes and positive impacts for all the youth they serve. Further, these findings can inform the broader field as The Food Project provides training and technical assistance to others across the nation who are engaging youth as leaders in the movement to encourage sustainable agricultural.

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## **Introduction**

Since 1991, The Food Project has been providing opportunities to “create personal and social change through sustainable agriculture” for youth and adults throughout the Greater Boston Area and the nation. The organization’s mission is clear:

To create a thoughtful and productive community of youth and adults from diverse backgrounds who work together to build a sustainable food system. This community produces healthy food for residents of the city and suburbs, provides youth leadership opportunities, and inspires and supports others to create change in their own communities.

With a total of 36 acres of farmland in Lincoln, Dorchester, Lynn and Beverly, The Food Project fulfills its mission through a range of approaches—educational programs, job and volunteer opportunities, community services, outreach, land reclamation, food production and distribution—all of which are grounded in the productive use of the resources of the land and the people who come together to work, grow, and serve the greater community.

The Food Project has a well-established youth program that brings youth from Boston, neighboring cities, and suburban communities to the land in Lincoln and Roxbury for paid jobs that offer challenging work experience, youth development and community service opportunities during the summer and the school year. These programs focus on building self-confidence and leadership skills while encouraging personal growth, engaging youth in meaningful work and providing opportunities to truly get to know people from different backgrounds and circumstances.

As an organization at the cutting-edge of its field, The Food Project is committed to learning and continual improvement, as well as sharing its experience with others. It has become a leader in the field—the national expert in engaging youth in the process of establishing sustainable food systems. As such, the organization is eager for information to inform their work, and that of others across the country. The present study is intended to contribute to that goal.

## **Study Overview**

Research has been a part of The Food Project for many years, with an evaluation consultant on hand to advise on data collection, assist in interpreting findings, and ensure that the organization uses data to inform its work and present itself to external audiences. As the organization begins to move into its next phase, it has an interest in understanding longer-range outcomes. As one part of this agenda, Brigham Nahas Research Associates was asked to conduct a Participant Follow-up Study to understand The Food Project experience from the perspective of past participants and to identify perceived impacts on

those who experienced the Summer Youth Program (SYP) plus the Academic Year Program (AYP), Internship Program, or both.

The central component of this study is in-depth telephone interviews with former participants. In the summer of 2006, The Food Project reached out to their alumni through the mail and internet to update their address database and to test its ability to draw past participants back into contact with the organization. Of the 705 alumni, 202 returned surveys (29 percent). The results of this effort were used to draw a sample to be interviewed for the present study. This included youth who first became involved with The Food Project during the SYP between 1998 and 2003, and who engaged in the Academic Year Program, the Internship Program, or both in subsequent years.

The young people in the study pool were 14 or 15 years old when they first spent a summer with The Food Project. They were between 18 and 24 when they were contacted for the interviews. BNRA researchers completed interviews with 30 past participants, findings from which form the core of this study. The 30 people interviewed were intentionally drawn to represent different categories of youth including males and females from the city of Boston and surrounding communities.<sup>1</sup> To complement what was learned through the interviews BNRA observed program activities and spoke with 2007 SYP participants in order to gain a better understanding of the program and, thus, the meaning behind reflections of past participants. Focus groups were also conducted with 2007 interns. Finally, the research team interviewed core staff responsible for youth programming at TFP.

The findings reported concern the experience and perspective of those young people who work with The Food Project the most intensively. As such, they offer rich descriptions of the program and the impacts they believe it has had on their lives. It is important to acknowledge that their perspectives are likely different from those who have had less experience with The Food Project, such as those that engage in the summer only or those that drop out of the program. These findings, however, offer a starting point for understanding the potential for longer-range impacts that The Food Project can expect from the experience, and can shape what the organization and others with similar missions might seek to explore and achieve in the future.

## Overview of the Report

The findings from the study are reported in three sections:

- **The Participants and Their Program Experience:** This section describes the experience of being involved in The Food Project. This includes a discussion of the characteristics of the youth participants, where they come from, and how they learned about The Food Project. It also considers their opinions about what was most and least valuable about the experience, and why.

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<sup>1</sup> Information about the sample pool and those interviewed is provided in Appendix A, along with a description of the research methods use in this study.

- **Perceived Impacts:** This section discusses the influence The Food Project has had on the lives of participants. We focus on impacts in the realm of work, leadership development, diversity of social circle, understanding of social issues, and the influence of what they learned about food and sustainable agriculture.
- **Conclusions: Program Implications and Further Study:** This section describes what it is about The Food Project that makes it successful, and what makes it unique in the field. Within this discussion are areas to attend to in the future, and suggestions for further study.

## **SECTION I**

### **The Participants and Their Program Experience**

The Food Project has completed its 16<sup>th</sup> year of providing unique experiences to youth through its Summer Youth Program (SYP), and later through the Academic Year Program (AYP) and within the Internship Program. The work on the land and in the community, high standards and expectations, diverse teams of work crews, open communication, and thoughtful workshops and experiences provide the foundation within which young people are brought together in Lincoln and Roxbury. Those who apply to The Food Project embark on a journey that has the potential to significantly shape their lives. The program elements are well-defined and quite structured in terms of content and experiences, but they are flexible enough to allow each individual to grow and develop in his or her own way.

Every spring, The Food Project makes an enormous effort to assemble summer work crews that combine a diverse mix of young people. This is central to the philosophy of how the summer experience can make a lasting impact. The crews are purposely formed to include white youth and youth of color, those from the city of Boston and those from surrounding communities, males and females, youth who present themselves as leaders along side those who are not, those with significant obstacles in life (i.e., personal challenges, difficult family circumstances) and those who appear to have all the advantages. These seemingly disparate people, however, share a stage in life—namely adolescence—and all the challenges, joys, and complications that come with it. It is from this platform of difference and similarity that The Food Project hopes to inspire, nurture, shape and develop those who are hired and who accept the challenge.

After the seven-and-a-half week Summer Youth Program (SYP) the youth have the option of applying to the Academic Year Program (AYP)—an opportunity that allows them to extend their involvement with The Food Project on Saturdays and optional afternoons each week during the school year. The AYP involves continued work on the land, leading groups of volunteers, involvement in hunger-relief organizations, more workshops and training, and ample public speaking opportunities. In addition to AYP, those that complete SYP can also apply for Food Project Internships, which are learning-rich work experiences that have a variety of demands and schedules. Internships focus on many different aspects of The Food Project's work, from cooking/kitchen work, community supported agriculture, and farming to advocacy, diversity, marketing, and urban education and outreach.

Like the summer crews, The Food Project consciously selects young people for AYP and Internships to create a diverse team to work together. In so doing, Food Project leaders are successful in bringing together those from Boston and from communities within the Greater Boston area, including small cities just outside of Boston and suburban communities further west. They are also conscious of gender balancing with their intensive experiences, though more females stay with the program than males. At the same time, Food Project staff note that the majority of the young people who continue

with AYP and internships are neither the youth who were considered seriously at-risk when they started the summer program nor those who were identified as already strong leaders. The former has difficulty committing to The Food Project demands during the school year and the latter tends to pursue other options available to them in their schools and communities. There is variation within the group, but few at the extremes. During the course of their time with The Food Project, it is clear that their status changes, with more and more leaders emerging. But, the majority of those who continue on in The Food Project tend to be considered in the “middle of the road” vis-à-vis the others at the time of application (neither “risk” nor “leader”).

We describe this population to set the context for the 30 people who participated in interviews for this study. This group was selected specifically to mirror the diversity of participants as described by program leaders. The Food Project’s philosophy rests on the value of bringing unlike people together, so exploring differential impacts and experiences is important. As such, data are analyzed to look for trends, namely similarities and differences across groups such as women compared to men and those from the Boston compared to their peers from communities outside of the city. While not a quantitative study that looks for statistical differences, the points of comparisons are helpful in painting a picture of how the experiences vary—or do not—depending on background characteristics.

Two-thirds of the group chosen for this study is female, and one-third is male. Forty (40) percent are from the city of Boston and 60 percent grew up in a nearby community.<sup>2</sup> Among those living inside and outside of Boston, there is considerable diversity as well—an “urban/suburban” split is much more complex than these terms might suggest. Some of the communities outside of Boston are small cities with ample economic and racial diversity (i.e., Cambridge, Brookline and Waltham). Others (the western suburbs) are fairly homogenous communities, in which the vast majority of the population is white and well-off economically. While it is the latter type of setting that may come to mind when the word “suburban” is used, it is important to emphasize the diversity of communities represented by The Food Project participants.

The group included in this study is diverse in many ways beyond gender and their family residence. A little over half of those interviewed consider themselves white (53 percent), 27 percent identify themselves as African American and the rest (20 percent) are Latino/a, Asian, or bi-racial. Most of those who identify themselves as white lived outside of the city, while the rest lived in Boston when they were involved in The Food Project. Four of the group of 30 were born outside of the United States, and spoke another language at home. Three of these four lived in Boston when they were in the summer program.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This is very similar to the overall pool in which 63 percent are female and 37 percent are male, and 39 percent are from Boston and 61 percent are from nearby communities. Appendix A provides additional details.

<sup>3</sup> Because so many of the demographic differences correlate very closely with being from Boston or from a surrounding community, it is difficult to tease out the influence of race and ethnicity versus place of residence. As such we focus mainly on the differences by where people lived because this was generally

In addition to demographic differences, those interviewed describe a range of personal circumstances and experiences that they brought to The Food Project. One factor that stands out is the extent to which each young person had been exposed to racially and economically diverse settings prior to coming to The Food Project. Forty (40) percent of those interviewed talked about being among diverse groups of people all the time in their neighborhoods and in their high school. For them, the diversity at The Food Project was “no big deal.” For the rest, however, exposure to people that were different from them was a radical departure from their experience up to that point. What was most interesting about this was that half of the youths from Boston and one-third of the youth from other communities said that they attended diverse high schools and were comfortable already being with people who are different from them. The other half of the Boston youth, and two-thirds of the group from outside the city were not accustomed to, or comfortable in, diverse settings before coming to The Food Project.

Another difference that cuts across location is the type of school the participants attended. Overall, close to three-quarters of those interviewed said they attended a high-performing high school including strong public schools (i.e., exam schools in Boston, or a public school outside of Boston with a good reputation) or private schools. The Food Project accepts students from all different kinds of high schools for the SYP but it appears that youth from lower performing schools are not as well represented in the AYP and Intern Program.

Throughout the report, we will see that these different starting points have implications for how the experience of The Food Project played out for the young people.

### **What Attracted Students to The Food Project?**

Those interviewed described various motivations for applying to The Food Project for the first summer of work. For about one third of those we interviewed, the primary motivation was simple: they needed a summer job. This included half of the group from Boston and one-fifth of those from another community. This job, however, was more attractive than some of the other opportunities available to them because it “...kept me outside” or “...it looked interesting.” The other two-thirds of those interviewed gave reasons that had more to do with the organization’s mission. Comments like the following were typical of this group: “I was really interested in sustainable agriculture,” “I love gardening and outside work,” “I thought it would be interesting to meet different kinds of people,” and “they offered leadership opportunities.”

How they learned about The Food Project was also quite different for those from the city and those from outside of Boston. Parents and family friends were the source of

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how those interviewed talked about the differences. When issues of race were raised, however, they are discussed as well.

information and encouragement for almost all of the small city and suburban participants. These youth typically described some kind of connection to The Food Project in their lives, such as a relative who had been on the board or a friend who knew the founder, or they had had some previous experience with or interest in programs offered at Drumlin Farms (Lincoln) and Land's Sake Farms (Weston), which have some program components in common with The Food Project. Overall, only a few of these youth came to The Food Project without prior connection to or knowledge about the organization and its work. One young woman even talked about seeing posters for The Food Project when she was a little girl, and counting down the years until she would be eligible to apply.

Within the group, however, there were some who were less drawn to the project or the land, and instead talked about it being a good alternative since they knew they had to do so “something” during the summer. For them, and their parents, The Food Project was a great steppingstone experience, somewhere between camps and working a “real” job (“I was at an age when you’re expected to get a summer job and I didn’t want to bag groceries at Stop-n-Shop.”). Others talked about it as something their parents wanted them to do to make them aware of their privilege and get them to start working harder. One young woman who described herself as from a wealthy suburban community commented:

*My parents were into [The Food Project]. They had issues around raising their kids in [COMMUNITY NAME], in this rich place. As a Freshman I didn't do well, so they wanted to kick my butt!*

The Boston-based youth, in contrast, almost all heard about The Food Project from a flyer or from someone at their school, such as a staff member whose job was to connect youth to summer jobs and other experiences. For most, The Food Project was one job among several that they applied to, or it was the only job they could find because they were so young. A paid job for 14-year olds was hard to come by, making it the prime motivation mentioned by the young men from the city. For most of this group, the farming, the dirt, the work, and the mission of The Food Project were totally new experiences, as was the commute from Boston to suburban Lincoln. There were exceptions, of course, with two of urban dwellers talking about family members who live on farms and their own enjoyment of gardening and being outdoors.

As a result, the entry into The Food Project was very different for youth from Boston and those from outside. What they shared, however, was that The Food Project was a first job for almost everyone.

### **The Program Experience: What was it like?**

When asked to describe The Food Project, most of those we interviewed started their answers by waxing nostalgic about their summer experience, and especially about working on the land in Lincoln. The heat, the bugs, the weeds, and the hard, hard work, the bone-tired feelings, and the challenges of fieldwork were new experiences that made

a considerable impression on everyone we spoke with, whether they loved it or hated it at the time. Some talked about the summer as “team work” and learning to be comfortable with people who were different from them. Others talked mostly about the field work itself and the reward that comes from seeing the fruits of their labor first hand. A few talked about workshops and other experiences that were designed to help them understand inequality, food scarcity, and the power of privilege. The work in the city—in hunger relief organizations and farmers’ markets—was described as well, as it put them in touch with those who would consume what they grew while exposing some to the city in ways that were new. While many aspects of the summer program were mentioned, the work on the land and the bonding with peers was the defining feature for everyone with whom we spoke.

In interviews, the AYP was somewhat harder for people to describe as a discrete portion of their Food Project experience, in contrast to the structure of the common SYP experience. This is not because AYP was seen as less valuable. Rather, it seems more challenging to define because the program was spread throughout the year, people were engaged in a lot of activities at the same time (i.e., school, drama, sports, etc.), and people could participate in AYP for different lengths of time (i.e., one term, two terms). When asked, some emphasized spending time in the city and in Saturday workshops, while others talked mostly about leading volunteers on the farm and doing community service. Many described AYP as a way of staying connected to The Food Project and extending their learning and involvement beyond the summer. For all who participated, AYP was an important bridge from the summer experience that deepened their connection to The Food Project, and further inculcated them with the culture and values The Food Project promotes.

The internships were described in depth by everyone who had one. The youth talked at length about their supervisors and about the work they accomplished. BLAST interns described developing and refining presentations and the wonderful, rewarding experience of traveling as a group to do workshops for others. Those in urban outreach and education internships became stewards of sustainability in the city—building raised beds, testing soil, and educating the community. Those who worked in the kitchen internship talked about learning cooking techniques, working with food, and understanding marketing and food distribution first hand. We heard about advocacy efforts, and ideas that interns were able to pursue through the flexible, encouraging and nurturing guidance of their internship supervisors. These experiences were nothing short of spectacular with respect to the content the youth were exposed to, the level of responsibility they were asked to assume, and the oversight and feedback they received from their supervisors.

The summer was a phenomenal experience for all, which was an expected finding since they were all impressed enough—or engaged enough—to continue. The majority talked about wanting to stick with The Food Project because they “just loved it” and wanted to “go deep with the content.” For others, it was just a natural next step because they continued to do things they enjoyed or found interesting. For this group, the “really cool reward” of the summer—of making it through it, of working on the land, of growing

food and seeing it used, of learning to thrive in The Food Project culture—was the opportunity to participate in the deeper elements of AYP and internships. These experiences were described by participants as “more intense” than the SYP, and more integral to the organization’s mission. One young woman described the move from SYP to AYP that “...the experience became less about me and my needs and more about the organization and the important, unique work they were trying to accomplish.” Others talked about developing stronger relationships with their supervisors and gaining more frequent, consistent and personal feedback about their performance during AYP and during the internships. As a result, both of these experiences were more fulfilling than the SYP, and seemed tailor-made for each youth, so she or he gained what was needed and grew in ways that were personally important—ways that were not necessarily the same for everyone involved.

### **Reflection on the Program Elements**

With the knowledge that comes with hindsight, we asked the group to think back over their time with The Food Project and describe what they found to be the most and least valuable aspects of their experience. It was difficult for respondents to pull the summer, AYP and internship experiences apart. Instead they talked about their experience with The Food Project as a whole as each element builds on the other, with none necessarily more valuable than another—each of them important in some way and none of them less valuable than another.

In interviews, respondents were asked first to comment on what they found most valuable about their experience with The Food Project. Next they were asked to comment on what they found was the least valuable aspect. Both questions were asked without additional probing in an effort to understand what elements came to mind first. Respondents often mentioned more than one element in response to this line of questioning.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Most Valuable Elements**

Straight Talk stood out as the most valuable element of the program for half of those interviewed, followed by opportunities for skill development and being exposed to diversity, which were listed by two-fifths and one-third of those with whom we spoke respectively. Almost everyone—nine out of ten people—listed one of these three elements as the most valuable parts of their experience.

**Straight Talk.** Straight Talk is clearly a cornerstone of The Food Project. It is essentially a structured process by which members of the organization provide feedback to one another in a controlled, respectful, and constructive manner. Using “positives” and “deltas” the crew leaders and other supervisors identify areas in which each person

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<sup>4</sup> Responses the questions about what was most and least valuable were coded and the results are presented in Tables B-1 and B-2 in Appendix B.

excels and contributes (the positives) and areas for improvement (the deltas), as well as feedback to help each person grow. There are also opportunities for the crew members to provide straight talk to each other, and for crew members to discuss issues with supervisors.

Those interviewed offered rich descriptions of why they found it so valuable:

*Straight Talk was the best. It was a chance to get and give feedback ... even give your boss feedback. We heard from the staff what we were doing right or wrong. It's harder now on other jobs for me because we can't give and get feedback.*

*Mentally, it was all about Straight Talk. They were—we were—always trying to get kids to take risks in a group setting...the positive and deltas created change on a mental level. Straight talk was the biggest asset to The Food Project experience.*

*[Straight Talk] was great...one of the best things I came away with. It is strange at first to talk with people this way, but you got used to it and it became important. It is great to reflect on your work...even if you are a great worker, there is room to improve. And, this is a big lesson.*

*At first many people are lazy in the crew, but Straight Talk does it: [NAME] wasn't weeding fast enough, we didn't finish our rows, so [CREW LEADER] was upset...so then there's the delta: you can weed faster! That's how you take friction or a problem and make it into something better.*

For many, Straight Talk was their first experience in getting and giving feedback and in voicing "...opinions in ways that are productive and not confrontational." Another notes, "[Straight Talk] is powerful...you had to learn how to hear what you didn't want to hear and how to take some things with a grain of salt." Finally, one young woman was particularly grateful for the Straight Talk experience and how it provided a productive way for staff to encourage the workers to improve.

*I always perceived that [Food Project staff] challenged you without insulting you. They pushed boundaries and challenged you without ever saying, 'you're wrong.' They ask you to revisit your ideas, and to be reflective, but they were extremely sensitive to how hard it is to change. They encourage you to imagine what you can be, and to imagine if things were different than you assume.*

This exposure to constructive criticism—as giver and receiver—at such an early age is extremely valuable, and, it seems to have made an enduring impression. Many talked about craving it in their current jobs, and a few talked about using it elsewhere in their lives.

There were four of those interviewed who were less enthusiastic about Straight Talk, expressing discomfort with hearing positive feedback about themselves and

complaining that some of the negative feedback was forced or not helpful. These individuals were spread across demographic groups and across program experiences, so trends were not observed. More generally, it seems that those who continue beyond the summer with The Food Project buy into the value of Straight Talk and are comfortable with it as a major communication mechanism in the organization.

**Exposure to Skill Development Opportunities and Diversity.** Opportunities for skill development and exposure to diversity were the second and third most commonly cited elements. With respect to the former, the youth talked about how The Food Project provided them with training as well as forums to practice the art of facilitating, taking risks, and leading groups and to develop and deliver presentations to the public. These elements were seen as highly useful, both at the time and in their lives now. The “diversity element” was talked about as simply bringing youth from different backgrounds together to work side-by-side and develop friendships and common experiences, which leads to comfort and learning. The importance is illustrated by participant comments such as the following:

*The human fireworks that happen when you bring these kids together ...kids that maybe look different, but quickly find that they are the same age, same point in high school, and none have done farm work before ...you're putting people in an unfamiliar situation, and they quickly learn what they have in common.*

Further, it was considered particularly valuable that The Food Project brought diverse groups of youth together, “before it gets ingrained in them that they do not have anything to talk about or anything in common.”

While there were no trends in who did and did not identify Straight Talk as valuable, there were sharp differences between those that identified the skill development opportunities and those that identified diversity elements as the most valuable parts of The Food Project. These are distinguished by what the youth bring to table in terms of their circumstances and previous experiences.

Females from Boston and those who did not attend strong high schools comprised the group that valued the skill development opportunities the most. We speculate that this might be because the opportunities offered at The Food Project were new to this group, making them extremely valuable—more valuable, perhaps, than for those who had similar opportunities at school and elsewhere. This group was quick to describe how The Food Project opportunities, feedback and preparation for public speaking and leadership were very useful and transferable to school and life. For example, one young woman from Boston exclaimed, “After the summer, my teachers at school were like, ‘Whoa! What happened to you?’ I was so much more open, I became a leader at school. I started answering questions.” In contrast, among those who did not consider these opportunities to be the most valuable, there were a few who grumbled about the amount of time spent on what they called “basic training” in public speaking and presentation skills. As one young woman put it, “one challenge for me at The Food Project was when we got into

training and some people had zero experience [with public speaking]...I felt like I was being held back. It was frustrating!”

The value of the diversity aspect was most commonly identified by those who indicated that they had not experienced diversity before coming to The Food Project. For them, the friends they made and the fact that they were able to get along with people that were so unlike what they were accustomed to was entirely different and, as such, extremely valuable. Many in this group did not know if they would have ever have gotten this kind of exposure elsewhere. This included both those from the city and from the wealthier suburbs, as two participants illustrate:

*Before I didn't know any suburban kids...but by working together we found common ground and interests.*

*Growing up in white middle class suburbs, you carry privilege and can't relate to others...I can finally navigate this because of The Food Project.*

In contrast, those who were accustomed to diverse settings in their daily lives were neutral about this aspect of The Food Project. As one young woman from a small city outside of Boston explained, “it was no big deal to me. My high school was totally diverse.” A few were quite critical of The Food Project’s efforts to create situations to “experience diversity,” calling them “inauthentic” which, as one woman from Boston explains, missed the point:

*If they were truly accepting of diversity, why do they have to talk about it all the time! And, why wasn't it real diversity. Not all kids from the urban areas are black, and not all suburban kids are white! Where are the black suburbanites – they're out there! This was irritating! This was just how life is...diversity is a common place way I live...nothing new here...but the more they pushed the ideas, the weirder it became!*

Taking these different starting points into account is an important consideration for The Food Project. The experiences are enormously valuable for those for whom the topics are new, but frustrating for those who are experienced. This represents another kind of “diversity” within The Food Project population about which staff and leaders need to be aware of and address through their programming to try to draw on past experiences without making anyone feel like they have less to bring to the group.

### **Least Valuable Elements**

For many, the question of what was the least valuable part of The Food Project was a difficult one to answer.<sup>5</sup> A little over one-third had a very hard time, resisting our persistence in asking them to think back to something that seemed less valuable to them

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<sup>5</sup> This was one area where we felt the sample of intensive participants was a challenge. We expect that research with those who did not continue beyond the SYP would reveal more critical information that could inform program improvement efforts.

while they were there or in hindsight. They were quick to identify elements they did not necessarily “like” at the time, such as sorting moldy bread during community service or working in the heat of the day. But, in every instance, these complaints were turned into positive learning experiences—learning that hunger relief organizations are dealing in scarce resources so you cannot waste anything and the lesson of work ethic that fields need tending regardless of the extremes in weather—which is clearly a Food Project ethos that came through in interviews.

Those interviewed generally have positive memories of their experience, but with effort, most did identify something that they thought was less effective during the experience. A few noted an element here or there—a specific workshop or game that they thought was not valuable—but none of these comments came together as a consistent trend or problem to be addressed. One stands out from the others, however, because it was mentioned most often. The “violation system” was identified by 40 percent as the least valuable program element. There were no differences in who identified them as the least valuable aspect; people criticized them in equal proportions from all subgroups.

At a later point in the interviews, a question was posed about violations as it was expected to be a controversial topic. The question generated a lot of discussion about the pros and cons of how the violation system worked and how effective it was as a strategy to hold crew members accountable and encourage certain behaviors. When people talked about the violations, they tended to refer to the summer program, during which the crews were all comprised of people who were new to The Food Project, as opposed to AYP and internships in which everyone is seasoned and accustomed to the work. For the group we interviewed, the violations during AYP and internship seemed few and far between, and when they were levied, those interviewed felt they were deserved.

In reflecting on the summer, some said the violations system was overly harsh and unfair at times. This was rarely an observation made about violations they received. Rather it reflected their observations of violations against peers in their crews. We heard that the violations sometimes brought people down, or made people disconnect from the work, rather than re-engaged or improve. One young man reflected:

*Looking back, for some kids it totally shut them down ... they had been struggling all their lives, they have a tough load, told over and over that they are a bad kid, and bonus/violation didn't help them. It puts them in a funk.*

Others felt there was a cultural bias to the violations—if the rules for behavior and attitude were different at home, or in a culture, a person was likely to get more violations. Some took this issue a step further and suggested that because of the cultural bias, the violations reinforced inequity, namely that youth from the city got more violations than suburban youth. One young man explained, “[with the violations and bonuses] those that win are those of privilege. The urban kids of color lost.” This was particularly bothersome given that “...for some of the city kids, who needed the money to contribute to their families, it was really tough.” Finally, there were several people who said the

problem with the violations was that the reasons for getting a violation were sometimes unclear, and if a person did not understand what he/she did wrong, it was impossible to improve. This was particularly true when the violation was for having a “bad attitude,” and the like.

While these opinions were expressed with passion, there was another group that spoke with equal vigor about the value of the violation system as a way to get everyone to step up to the expectations of The Food Project because they had to suffer very tangible consequences. To this group, there was a sense of relief that people were called out for not fulfilling expectations. It seemed fair, and it was a way to get people on the same page. One young man from Boston describes how he earned a lot of violations during his first summer because he hated the farm work and was unmotivated. The violations were very valuable to him because they turned him around:

*I pushed the boundaries so it was valid for them to give me the violation. They would always give examples and reasons. This was totally helpful to get feedback to grow ... they didn't want to fire me, they were shaping me, some saw me as a trouble maker but others really believed in me.*

For the rest—roughly half of the interview group—the violations did not hold much meaning. To some, they were forgettable or irrelevant, which was particularly true for those who were not relying on their pay check for anything besides a cushion in their saving account. For others, the violations were annoying or just a small price to pay for doing something they shouldn't—often something that they called fun and memorable. It is important to bear in mind that most of those giving this feedback did not receive many violations themselves. It begs the question of how others who are less attached to The Food Project experienced the violations.

For the most intensive group of Food Project participants, it was clear that The Food Project was a meaningful and engaging experience. But what did they gain, what did they learn, and how did they change as a result of the experience? We turn to these questions in the next section.

## SECTION II: Perceived Impacts

*The Food Project has had a big impact on me. It made me more aware of my power to do what I want in life.*

*I can't imagine what my life would be like without The Food Project. It shaped my food, personal politics, vocation, career, and how to be a good worker. It resonated so much for me, it defined me.*

*It changed me in striking ways. I was meek and quiet, lacking in confidence as any adolescent is. I'm still quiet and introspective; I've retained that, but now I'm not afraid to take risks...I'm not worried about using my voice.*

*I don't really want to admit it because it's so, ummm...[INTERVIEWER: Corny?]....yea, like they will put this on their website, but yes, it changed my life. [It] stimulated me in all the right ways.*

*People from The Food Project go on to do great things.*

These comments are typical of what we heard in each and every interview. The Food Project reaches out to young people at a point in their lives when they are in the midst of figuring out who they are and what they want to be. They are trying on identities and exploring alternatives in the comforts of the program, but with the rigors of a real job.

Past participants were eager to share what they gained and learned, and how they changed as a result of being part of The Food Project. They identified large personal breakthroughs and transformations as well as small shifts in attitudes, opinions, and behaviors that have stuck with them over the years. Many were passionate about how The Food Project shaped their lives, and were eager to push their friends and younger siblings to take part. All were articulate about how their time with The Food Project influenced some aspect of their present life—not necessarily the same aspect across all interviews, but everyone had something substantive and significant to share.

We learned about the impacts of The Food Project in a number of different ways. Many of the young people launched into what they gained from the experience in response to the first question in the interview, which asked them to describe The Food Project (i.e., “It was life changing for me because...”). Building on these comments (or as a starting point for those who did not begin to describe impacts on their own), we asked a general question about how participating in The Food Project made a difference in their lives and whether/how it changed them. The responses were coded into “unprovoked responses,” meaning impacts the youth described without additional probing by the researcher.

Toward the end of the interview, researchers asked a series of impact-related follow-up questions that were more specific and focused. These questions probed about specific outcomes in the areas on which The Food Project intends to make an impact: among others these include imparting job skills, developing leadership skills, deepening understanding of social issues, encouraging work ethic, expanding diversity of social circle, influencing diet, and providing information about sustainable agriculture. Respondents were asked to reflect on each and describe whether and in what ways The Food Project had an impact in these areas. Prior to asking the specific outcome questions, we emphasized that The Food Project means different things to different people and it is not expected that every outcome will be achieved with every person, so we urged them to be reflective and selective. When they indicated that an outcome was achieved, we probed for specific examples to illustrate what changed in them and how it linked to their Food Project experience. If the person was able to give an example as evidence, they were coded as having achieved the outcome.<sup>6</sup>

Analysis of the unprovoked responses and those to specific questions about outcomes provide a clear message from those interviewed: there is very strong alignment among program activities, goals, and what the participants say they gain from being a part of The Food Project. The unprovoked responses matched those The Food Project describes. Each of the specific outcomes was greeted with affirmative responses by the majority of those we interviewed, and there were very strong examples to back up their assertions. And, while there were no surprises or unexpected findings within the group, their interpretations of what the outcomes mean and the relative strength of specific outcomes are interesting, as are differences by demographic groups.

The Food Project is intentional in striving to hit many different kinds of outcomes, but not every outcome is applicable to every youth. This is a positive finding, reflecting that The Food Project can be many things to youth who bring different sets of skills and experiences to the table. All find something important to gain. Further, the reflections of the most intensive participants set the expectations for the types of outcomes the organization can look for going forward.

Six main categories of impacts are discussed in the sections to follow:

- Becoming a Worker: Job skills, Work Ethic, and Plans for the Future
- Leadership...The Food Project Way
- Experiencing, Appreciating, and Valuing Diversity
- Deepening Understanding of Social Issues
- Appreciating Food
- Learning about Sustainable Agriculture

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<sup>6</sup> Chart B-3 in Appendix B shows the percentage of each “unprovoked response” and Chart B-4 in Appendix B shows the percentage of each “specific outcome”.

## Becoming a Worker

The fact that The Food Project was the first formal, paid job for just about everyone we interviewed was extremely important. It was the first experience that these young people had had with supervisors, being held accountable, getting feedback, and assuming responsibility. It was the first time they were part of a team working toward a goal with tangible outcomes. It was the first time many realized that their individual efforts were needed—critical, even—for the goals to be accomplished. Several talked about what it was like to feel so useful and productive, and for their effort to be important to fulfilling the mission of the larger organization.

As a result, work-related themes came across in every interview. It was clear that experience with The Food Project had a considerable impact on the way young people thought about jobs and careers, on the skills and attitudes they brought to their next jobs and on their plans for the future. The Food Project participants describe themselves as employees that are hard working, responsible, and “go getters” on the job—exactly what most employers seek out. All but a few credit their experience at The Food Project with helping them develop these traits and values.

Just about everyone interviewed said The Food Project provided them with the “basics”—job readiness skills that are an expectation on just about any job one would encounter, including show up, be on time, call if you have a problem, do what is expected, and be responsible for whatever work you are assigned. Many said The Food Project was great exposure to the kinds of expectations they have experienced on every other job they have held since. As one person explained, “...responsibility, be on time, avoid the violations. I’ve used all of this elsewhere.” Another person, attending an Ivy League school, described his current employer’s reaction to his tardiness one day on the job: “They were really mad at me. I thought, WOW, The Food Project really wasn’t making that up...being a stickler about being on time for work is really important!” They also described the “paperwork” of employment as something they learned how to handle, such as dealing with a pay check, time cards, tax forms, and managing direct deposit. The Food Project made them familiar and comfortable with the world of work at an early age and this, as one participant put it, “...has made me a better worker.”

Participants also described more specific job skills that they gained at The Food Project, many of which they have carried forward into their next jobs. One talked about learning to sell and market at the farmers market during SYP and AYP, and through his internship. A few said their writing improved by their work on grants during their internships. Others talked about “office skills” and the ability to “track down information” as a direct result of their internships. Generally feeling “...comfortable on the job” was mentioned by several who talked about having to make phone calls to strangers, approach people and take on responsibilities, which have made them more self confident than they feel they would have been otherwise. Management skills were also mentioned as something gained from The Food Project, as is described by one young man from Boston:

*The biggest thing is managing people that are older than you—definitely from The Food Project. Public speaking, they taught you to speak in the right professional way, and to behave and deliver bad news so that it can be heard, how to fire employees, what it means to be held responsible, operations, being organized. [I gained] all this from The Food Project.*

Three-fourths of the group noted that they gained work ethic from The Food Project. The rest said that they came already instilled with a strong work ethic that was only fostered and encouraged at The Food Project, but not developed. There were demographic trends that emerged: males from Boston and females from the western suburbs were most likely to believe The Food Project helped them develop their work ethic, while females from Boston and males from outside were more likely to say they already had a strong work ethic from their families or just from within, which helped them succeed at The Food Project.

Those that credited The Food Project for their work ethic described the land as a metaphor:

*You get this from working the land. You have to be patient with the land, with planting. It isn't a one-time thing you do and leave. You have to keep with it all hot summer to see it grow.*

And, further, “you can’t complete The Food Project summer without a strong work ethic.” When asked directly whether The Food Project influences work ethic or if young people who have a good work ethic find their way to The Food Project, one young man was emphatic that “they inspire it” through Straight Talk which makes sure that everyone pulls his or her weight. And, another participant reminds us that “you can’t fake manual labor!”

In addition to skills and work ethic, the majority of those interviewed said that The Food Project had an influence on their thinking about higher education, careers, or both. There are, of course, countless factors that influence a young person’s thinking about choices and decisions. Each came in to The Food Project with a set of values and each has had many experiences subsequently that have made an impression. But, four out of five those interviewed identified a significant contribution that The Food Project experience made to their plans, goals, and perspective for their future careers.

About one-third held career goals that they said were a direct result of their work at The Food Project, such as becoming a “green architect,” urban planner/developer that focuses on sustainability, or even wanting to work on the land and in promoting local agriculture. Several were interested in advocacy and social justice, and talked a lot about “food justice” and “food systems” as a means to improving people’s lives. A few talked about being turned on to food-related careers—entering a culinary institute, working in catering—and they said their love of food, hospitality, and cooking came from their experience at The Food Project.

For the rest, the linkage to The Food Project is not so directly tied to content, but the youth themselves made a connection between what they gained and what they want to do. Often this involved uncovering a talent or passion at The Food Project that they are currently pursuing. For example, a future nurse and a youth worker both talked about choosing these fields as a result of learning from the service work and from their interactions with others at The Food Project that they have a gift for working with diverse groups of people and they want to use that gift by entering a helping profession. A marketing and sales professional was emphatic that without The Food Project he never would have been able to stand up, make presentations, and experience the joy he gets on the job. An aspiring politician describes his desire to use his position of privilege (as a self-described white man from a wealthy family) to enter politics and “become a caring politician,” and he relates this compassion to the fact that The Food Project opened his eyes to a world he had not known about before.

### **Leadership...The Food Project Way**

Developing leadership skills came up as a first response for over half of those we interviewed. We also asked directly about whether The Food Project helped youth develop leadership skills and we heard an overwhelming “yes,” with all but four people providing specific examples of how The Food Project made them a stronger, better leader.

Leadership is defined by this group in a way that reflects The Food Project approaches and values. To the former Food Project participants, a leader is a person who is respected, has a strong voice, can communicate and present ideas well, can listen even better, and who can bring disparate people together toward a common goal. Leadership is not a matter of assuming specific roles or of being in charge; it is facilitating greatness and exploring possibilities. As such, their reflections on how The Food Project helped them “develop leadership skills” were equally broad and included overcoming shyness, learning to listen, facilitating a group, and becoming a skilled and compelling public speaker.

Leadership development at The Food Project is illustrated in the reflections of one young woman who said she came to the organization already a “natural-born leader” and that what she learned through The Food Project leadership didn’t come to her until later. Now, however, she says:

*I see myself leading—and I am leading because I am listening. I am leading instead of dragging. People used to listen to me because they had no choice. I was loud, would talk over them. [I] would foist my own agenda on people. But now, I have learned to listen to what others say, and incorporate their opinion, thinking, suggestions into what I am doing. This is real leadership. And, this is pure Food Project learning.*

### **Experiencing, Appreciating, and Valuing Diversity**

There was a core group in our interview for whom exposure to and becoming comfortable with diversity was the most profound impact of The Food Project. They were passionate about what they learned and how it influences their lives.

Seventy percent of those we talked to indicated that The Food Project had an influence on how they deal with diversity in their lives. Importantly, it was the first-response by about one-third of those with whom we spoke, almost all of whom grew up in homogenous settings. More specifically, almost all of those who said that diversity was new to them cited this as an impact, while only half of those who were comfortable with diversity beforehand could describe something they gained. We found that “diversity impacts” were greatest among males from outside of the city, and the smallest among the women from Boston.

For those that cited this impact, the exposure to differences—and the deepening understanding of what it means to work together in diverse groups—was said to make a considerable impact on who they are, what they think, and their comfort in a diverse world. One young woman from a suburban community reflected passionately about how what she gained from being exposed to other kinds of people through The Food Project:

*The Food Project made me more willing to do things with people with whom I wouldn't know where to start! I would always be okay with race differences—I mean like a preppy black kid, no big deal. That would have been okay. But there are cultural—no style—differences that make it harder. Now, I am perhaps still more comfortable with preppy. But I'm not scared of bling-bling...I have something to say to anyone. I think that [diversity issues/problems] are more about fear than actual dislike of people who are different...Before The Food Project I was scared I just wouldn't have anything to say to someone who was so different from me...but now, I know that I can find something to talk about, that someone might not 'get me' right away and that's okay.*

This sense of nervousness coming into The Food Project and comfort coming out the other end was raised repeatedly. Several youth talked about how The Food Project helped them find a way to break down “white-kid nervousness”—a term used by several of those interviewed—which was described as:

*...nervousness in culture, saying the wrong thing, knowing how to communicate. It was like new hip knowledge. I've hung out with all the same people all my life, and society shapes all these differences and privileges, and it is important to acknowledge this, [to] remember we are all human.*

A young woman from Boston talked about how The Food Project helped her when she started 9<sup>th</sup> grade because her middle school was almost entirely African American. Having spent the summer with a more diverse group eased her into her high-performing, diverse Boston exam school with much less trepidation than she says she would have felt otherwise.

Even though the exposure and comfort were generally increased among those who were previously uncomfortable in (or unfamiliar with) diverse settings, there remained a lot of frustration that the young people could not maintain lasting relationships or friendships with those they met through The Food Project. This was primarily attributed to geography. Long distance relationships are challenging at best, and the western suburbs and downtown Boston seemed like worlds apart to young adults without cars and whose parents did not let them travel alone by T to connect with friends in the city. Several people talked fondly about friends they made in the summer and carried into the AYP or internships, but they said that it was impossible to get together much outside of The Food Project. As such, friendships drifted apart.

Another frustration that several youth who live in homogenous suburban communities raised was that they simply did not know what to do with their new-found knowledge about and comfort with diversity. How can they apply what they learned outside of The Food Project? The Metco program came up in several interviews. They described the group of students at their high school who lived in Boston, were bussed to their suburban school, and remained essentially isolated, sitting as a group in classes and at lunch, not making close friendships except with those with whom they shared the ride from the city. This was disturbing. One young man talked about being excited after his summer with The Food Project to try to reach out to the Metco students, and felt like what he learned did not help him:

*I was all fired up to break into the Metco circle, and in some ways I did. It was super challenging, but what I learned is that no one was really open to it, but I kept pushing and ultimately felt that it wasn't right to do this, be so purposeful to make friends based on race, there was something unnatural... to go out and make friends like that.*

And, another young man from a suburban community said, “I understand my guilt and anxiety around the Metco kids because I know it is wrong, but don't know what to do.” One woman talked about wishing there was “a project or something” that she could work with Metco students on so they could connect. This frustration—knowing they would like to have more diversity in their lives, wanting to make a difference but not knowing how—was palpable.

### **Deepening Understanding of Social Issues**

Three out of four of those interviewed said that The Food Project made a significant impression on their understanding of social issues and problems. The deepening understanding was an “unprovoked response” by one-third of the people, a group which tended to be male and from suburban settings. From the interviews, it is not clear why, but we speculate that for many from this group it was the first time they had engaged in community service so it made a stronger impression than it did on those who had more experience with this kind of work. Further, through workshops, many of these

young men may have been confronted with their positions of privilege in eye-opening ways.

There were a number of people who offered compelling examples of how their experiences working in hunger-relief organizations and homeless shelters brought the complexity of social issues to light, and changed their impressions of people in need. Comments like the following were common:

*In school you learn about things...hunger and things, but you don't get it until you work with it...The Food Project gave me the right to say, 'this is what I think about whatever because X' because I actually came in contact with it.*

The community-work experiences also gave a “face” to the guests who come to the agencies in which the youth worked. Several talked about developing a more realistic, comprehensive, and altruistic understanding of the homeless and of the circumstances that led them to the streets. Participants talked about becoming more compassionate toward those in need, because they saw it was not always someone’s fault that they were without a home, job, or food. Others talked about being surprised by the breadth and depth of need in their community, as one exclaimed, “I knew there were shelters and food pantries around, but I did not know how much people actually needed them [and] how much people actually relied on the services.”

Others developed a stronger sense of how to approach seemingly untenable social problems. Many came to The Food Project with a concern for social justice and equity, but they gained an understanding of a food-related solution and approach that changed the way they think. As one woman explained:

*The Food Project showed an interesting way to improve the situation. Focus on the environment, on food, on sustainable agriculture. Food is key! It's about culture, sustainability, improving life in an urban area, building community!*

Finally, the workshops and exercises that were done as a group had a big impact on a small group of respondents—particularly on males living outside of Boston. We heard about The Hunger Banquet and the Ice Cream game which emphasized inequity in resource distribution in which the poor seemed to get poorer and the rich get richer. For others (particularly those who lived with less) these workshops had a negligible impact. One young woman from Boston offered her reflections on the reaction of her suburban peers to one of these activities:

*It didn't occur to me that kids in the suburbs didn't think or talk about diversity, but they really don't! [The Ice Cream preference activity] was really eye-opening for the rich kids. They got all jacked up. They got much more enlightenment from it than we did.*

More generally, experiencing the city was eye-opening for many of the youth from the western suburbs, who thought of Boston as a dangerous place and who were

scared to (or whose parents were scared to let them) go to Dorchester or Roxbury on their own. As The Food Project built bridges among diverse groups of youth, they also forged in-roads into communities that are unfamiliar with each other even though they are nearby. As such they encourage open-mindedness and compassion, as well as an interest in doing something proactive about rectifying the problems.

## **Appreciating Food**

The Food Project is about many things, but it wouldn't be The Food Project without the food. One youth said it best: "All day, and every day I think about them when it comes to eating."

When asked directly, seventy (70) percent gave examples of how their diet and eating habits changed and improved as a result of what they learned at The Food Project. These were also "unprovoked response" by two-fifths of those interviewed, making it one of the most common outcomes mentioned up front. Food-related impacts were most often talked about by young women from Boston, who described learning an entirely new way to eat, shop, and cook. It was less common among females from outside of the city, who said they already ate well (healthy and organic), and by males (living both in and outside of the city) who either relied on their families to cook for them or who said they tend to eat whatever is available, easy, and cheap.

Some talked about expanding their diets to include more diverse foods, especially increasing the range of vegetables they would eat or try, and eat more non-processed, healthy foods in general. One talked at length about her cooking techniques ("Kale...now there's a tricky vegetable"). Tasting new things—and valuing the taste of organic produce was also a common theme. One young woman gave an anecdote to illustrate:

*Greg had two pints of strawberries on the first day, and he cut them in slices on different plates...he said, 'Anyone want one? Try this first,' and I was like, 'yeah, I like strawberries.' The Stop-N-Shop one was good...then I had one of ours, and it was amazing!!*

Many of those who did not prepare their own food still believed that The Food Project changed their eating habits because they no longer eat fast food, or they eat much less of it than they used to. There were a couple who said that they did not necessarily change the way they ate, but they were aware of the damage they were doing so may change at some point. There were two—both women from Boston—who became certified "foodies" as a result of The Food Project, interested in culinary arts and accomplished cooks at home or at work. There were others who talked about being eager to be out of school and have a place of their own where they could grow food, cook more, and eat the way they would like to. Finally, the group for whom The Food Project did not have a food/diet-related impact, all said they came to the experience already sold on the value of eating healthy (or it is how their parents fed them) so there was nothing The Food Project could do to change their behaviors or attitudes.

The strength of this finding was surprising to The Food Project staff as diet and healthy eating were not necessarily emphasized during the program years when the cohorts we spoke with were in the program. We suspect that much of the information and learning from The Food Project has stuck with—or reemerged—for this group because it has become so present in the mainstream media. With Fast Food Nation and Super Size Me, news about obesity, and the rising interest in organic products, The Food Project participants were ahead of the curve. We also suspect that the influence on diet and eating habits came from the less formal interactions among staff and peers during which those interviewed learned about what it means to be vegetarian or to eat organic.

### **Sustainable Agriculture**

When asked directly, better than half of those we interviewed (62 percent) said they gained information about sustainable agriculture, and were able to describe something they learned or something they do differently as a result. This was the lowest percentage among the outcomes about which we asked directly. The responses and examples with respect to sustainable agriculture were harder to elicit than with other outcomes. Most of the examples involved trying to buy local, and being aware of how far food travels to get to local markets. Only two people talked about sustainable agriculture as an unprovoked response to how The Food Project influenced them. Both are currently working or studying in the field.

Among those who said the information made an impact, several noted that they had a leg-up in course work at college because they already knew a lot from their summer experiences. Others commented that what they learned at The Food Project made them more receptive to information related to sustainable agriculture that they hear now, with comments such as the following: “When I hear something on the news about it, I tune in. I know what they’re talking about.” Finally, several talked about wanting to grow their own food at some point—either on their own in their neighborhood home or to join a community farm at some point in their lives. A few even talked about starting community farms on campus, or organizing a CSA in their community.

When the question about what they learned about sustainable agriculture was posed, two-fifths of respondents had a hard time recalling any content. Many of those from outside of Boston described themselves as being fairly “green” before coming to The Food Project—conscious about what they consume and the implications for the world. For them, The Food Project information was added to their knowledge base, but it did not change how they live, shop, or eat, nor did they necessarily give a lot of credit to The Food Project for extending this knowledge. Many of those living in Boston and in urban areas outside of Boston talked about it being difficult to practice what they learned because organic food is expensive and buying local is not realistic in their neighborhoods.

## SECTION III

### **Conclusions: Program Implications and Further Study**

Embedded across the interviews are reflections that show that The Food Project encompasses the most important features that high-quality youth development programs share. Caring staff treat youth with kindness and respect. High expectations and rewards for performance are balanced with ample opportunities to learn from mistakes and to show improvements. Strong and conscientious leadership ensures consistent program implementation from crew-to-crew and year-to-year. Tight alignment between activities and outcomes make each component worthwhile and meaningful. Thoughtful program design, planning, and continual reflection promise that the program is current and improves.

Most importantly, The Food Project stays on mission, maintaining the integrity of what it has set out to do for the past 15 years. And, most telling is that the participants we interviewed, who devoted so much time to The Food Project, are extremely grateful to have had the experience. They were eager to share their opinions and contribute to the organization so the next generation of Food Project youth can benefit as well.

#### **What Sets The Food Project Apart?**

While The Food Project shares common elements with many youth programs, three features set it apart: the first-job experience, purposefulness of the diversity element, and the most valuable resource—the land.

#### **The Food Project is a Phenomenal First Job**

The fact that The Food Project is the first formal, paid job for just about everyone they serve is extremely important. It is the first experience that these young people have with supervisors, being held accountable, getting feedback, and assuming responsibility. This makes a lasting impression.

The literature is replete with debate about the benefits and costs of paid work during adolescence. The general tenor is that work can be important and beneficial, but that the quality of adolescent jobs matters enormously. High-quality, learning-rich jobs can help young people see the connection between what they learn in school and what they need in life. They can expose young people to skills and career options as well as talents and passions that set them on a positive educational pathway, motivated to do well in school and beyond. Good role models and caring supervisors can be influential as another adult to whom a young person can turn for advice, guidance, and help. At the other extreme, lousy jobs can have the opposite effect, with potentially detrimental consequences. Long hours take away from school work, bad supervisors don't provide a learning experience, and exposure to disgruntled employees result in a first job with no value at best and negative impacts at worst.

There is no doubt that The Food Project provides an incredibly strong first job experience through the summer program, the AYP and the internship. The work is “real” and the responsibilities are significant. Every person we interviewed—from those who were most enthusiastic to those who were most critical—had very positive things to say about Food Project staff. Supervisors and The Food Project leadership were described as positive role models for what it means to be a great worker, and a good human being. Critical job skills are emphasized, responsibilities are clearly outlined, and feedback and constructive criticism from supervisors and peers is direct and consistent, thanks to Straight Talk. Arming youth with the ability to be open-minded, to hear criticism, to be open to change, and to offer their opinion to others in a respectful way is a gift they will forever enjoy.

The land in Lincoln and Roxbury requires ongoing, hard work and the organization is willing to ask youth to play a significant role. The Food Project does this through authentic jobs in farming, food distribution, education, and outreach which allow for many different kinds of work experiences that accommodate most interests and ability levels. The young people become experts in their jobs quickly—skilled and informed enough to guide adult volunteers and to take on portions of work on their own—which make it all the more meaningful. This is not easily accomplished in most work places. Consider hospitals or law firms where the core work requires credentials and experience so young interns often end up engaging in projects created for them, which are limited to career exposure and work-readiness skills rather than resume-building jobs that jump out to the next employer.

The job experience is a significant program strength, which can continue to be developed and expanded. Two aspects were raised in interviews that leadership should bear in mind moving forward. The first is the “violations” which were identified as problematic by a portion of the group. At the same time, they are a critical feature of the first-job experience as the violation system effectively outlines the standards, expectations, and consequences. The organization may want to revisit the system in light of the issues raised by those interviewed, and perhaps conduct additional research with other populations to understand implications before considering significant changes. The second issue concerns maintaining the quality of the work experiences as the organization grows to serve more youth. One reason the experiences are so good is that the work that the youth do is clearly important to the functioning of the organization. Be wary of expanding internships beyond jobs that are truly and obviously useful and productive to those you hire and to those who are supervising them.

### **Experiencing Diversity: Purposeful, Sustained, and Meaningful**

In a metropolitan area with residential segregation and a history of racial tension, and in a world in which integration remains a distant vision, The Food Project has taken on a Herculean task. By providing an experience for youth from different backgrounds to interact in a sustained, meaningful, and authentic way, The Food Project is going beyond where most youth development programs tread.

From the start, The Food Project is unusually purposeful in designing crews for the summer to create a group in which people with different backgrounds, personal circumstances, and experiences will interact and bond. With this at its core, there is no way around the nervousness and inevitable discomfort that come from the experience. But, The Food Project does not shy away from friction. Instead, they embrace it and use it to encourage personal growth and change. For those unaccustomed to diverse settings, this is clearly a significant experience.

While the youth expressed some frustration about what “to do” with their new-found comfort, it is likely that they are doing more than they think they are. Subtle attitude changes are potentially important but hard to tease out with this kind of a study because they become ingrained in how a person lives his or her life. For example, just by exposing groups to each other and providing a common experience, a person may treat people who are different from them in a more positive way in school or the workplace. They may have changed the way they think about others and overcome stereotypes they did not even realize they held. They may be more accepting of friendship in all settings as they mature. Despite the lack of enduring relationships and the frustration on what to do next, those we spoke with seem to embrace the kinds of values that would suggest these types of changes. We cannot say for sure from this study, but it is something to consider in future research.

The Food Project goes through an extraordinary effort to encourage youth to think about and experience diversity. As such, these efforts should be leveraged to the fullest. We would urge the organization to strive to make the diversity elements—especially the workshops and trainings—cutting-edge to take advantage of the unique situation they create. Each year young people will become increasingly sophisticated about these issues so the organization needs to stay fresh and current to keep the youth engaged. And, for those who come to you already comfortable in diverse settings, seek out ways to deepen the experiences so they also find value as well. The potential at The Food Project is enormous since the experience is sustained (over at least seven and one-half weeks and up to several years) and the commitment on the part of leadership and staff is steadfast.

### **The Land as a Resource**

Last—but in many ways, foremost—The Food Project has an incredible resource in “the land.” Given the way program impacts were described, one might conclude that the land is simply an instrument for delivering work experience, personal development, and exposure to diversity. Instead, we believe that the land plays the pivotal role in making all elements so successful.

From the start, the work on the land is a trial for almost all participants. Farming is new to just about everyone and intimidating to most. It is physically very demanding. It is emotional—stressful and scary as it takes people out of their comfort zone. The intensity of manual labor is a surprise and is thought to be difficult, even for the most athletic in the group. As such, the land and the farm work create the perfect space to

level the playing field for the crews. Fashion doesn't matter, academic acumen does not help, your musical preferences aren't relevant, and it is hard to keep up a persona or bravado when you are hot, tired, dirty, and spent from a day in the field.

It is on the land, working side-by-side—miserable at times, elated at others—that much of the bonding occurs and relationships form, both within and across groups of like and unlike crew members and leaders. It is on the land that pretenses break down and the learning and development has the potential to occur. This includes learning on a deep, personal level, where young people are forming identities and becoming who they are. But, it also includes acquiring new knowledge that is theirs alone, making them special in their household or neighborhood. The value of this should not be underestimated at a point in life when youth are so painfully aware of what people share and what sets them apart.

In a less tangible but still significant way, the fact of the farm cycle—the planting seeds, tending crops, harvesting, and consuming—is a wonderful metaphor for youth. They recognize many truths in their lives that the work on the land reflects, and these endure over time. Hard work pays off. Stay on top of the weeds. There is always more work. Effort matters. Simple things make a difference. From small seeds, great things grow. Practice patience.

While promoting stewardship of the land, The Food Project promotes similar values in the way they work with the youth who join them—protecting, guiding, nurturing, and preserving their spirits as the young people move into adulthood, arming them with skills and attitudes that will help them stand up and be strong in their world.

### **Thoughts on Further Research**

The Food Project model is clearly a strong one that has maintained a steady course for many years. The results of this study point to many program strengths and no significant flaws that need to be addressed. A few issues were raised which should be on an agenda for further reflection—violations, expansion, deepening diversity, and the lack of retention of knowledge about sustainable agriculture. These are offered as points to strengthen some of the strongest program elements, but the present study does not shed light on simple solutions to be quickly implemented. Instead, these are areas for the organization to monitor, think about, and debate as it moves into its next phase.

In conducting the present study, other areas for research certainly emerge, which might be useful going forward.

The experience of the summer-only participants would be one obvious area to explore to contrast what is gained from different levels of involvement with the organization and to provide some insight into program implementation from a group that is likely to be more critical. A study of this group could be similar to the present study, asking people to reflect on their experience in hindsight (though we would recommend

focusing on a cohort that is closer to the experience than those in the present study). Another option would be to follow a cohort of summer participants forward, and compare the experiences of those who continue on with The Food Project and those who stop after the summer. Both are viable options to be developed further.

The organization also might consider looking to other sources for perspective on what youth gain from The Food Project, such as parents, teachers, or future employers. From the results of the present study, we believe all three could add a dimension to deepen and strengthen the findings presented here. These might be stand-alone studies (i.e., a parent follow-up survey or interviews with teachers), or could become part of the broader research agenda.

A longitudinal study design in which cohorts were followed forward would be most useful to capture changes over time in attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors prior to The Food Project, and at subsequent points in time during and after the experience. Building in a comparison group would also be useful so you could begin to show what impacts are due to The Food Project and what are not. Planning for such a study is presently underway at the organization, and it is hoped that the findings in the current study inform the planning and design.

## APPENDICES

Appendix A: Research Methods

Appendix B: Charts

## APPENDIX A: Research Methods

### Sample Selection

The sample for the present study was drawn from the results of an alumni outreach effort conducted by The Food Project with help from Prof. Shirley Brown in the Summer/Fall of 2006. All alumni were contacted by mail and asked to complete a questionnaire, either by mail or by telephone. On this survey, alumni were also asked if they would be willing to be called for a follow-up interview. The response rate for this survey was 29 percent, with a higher percentage of people from the more intense group (those with summer plus another experience) responding than from the summer-only group. The better response among the intense group suggests that the respondents are a better representation of the overall population of those that spent more than a summer with the organization. This was one reason the present study focused on the intensive Food Project group.

The present study included cohorts of people who participated in SYP between 1998 and 2003. This group was considered optimal for follow-up interviews because they had been away from The Food Project long enough to have some perspective on the experience, and all were on track to have at least graduated from high school.

In the original pool from which the study sample was drawn, there were eighty-six (86) names and addresses. Of those, 39 were not included in the potential interview pool for the following reasons:

- Twenty-six (26) people participated only in the summer program
- Two (2) were currently employed by The Food Project, so were not eligible to be in the study
- Four (4) refused to participate (and indicated this on the initial survey)
- Seven (7) in the database were crew leaders but not participants

These names were excluded immediately. When we reached out to the remaining forty-seven (47) people, we found that three people were unreachable because their addresses had changed, phones were disconnected, and no one was reached at their “permanent” address. As such, the sample pool included 44 people to be eligible to be interviewed.

Once the 44 youth were selected for the study, BNRA sent a letter and (where available) an e-mail to everyone in the sample pool, describing the study, informing them that a member of the research team would be calling, urging them to consider participating, and telling them that they would be paid \$20 in cash for being interviewed. Participants were assured confidentiality in their responses, noting that no names would be used in the report. Each person received a phone call within one week of receiving the letter, during which an appointment was set, a message was left, or an interview was conducted.

Thirty (30) youth were interviewed for this study and care was taken in selecting this group to ensure that the mix of females from Boston, males from Boston, females from communities outside of Boston, and males from outside of Boston were represented as closely as possible to the overall pool. Interviews were pursued with all 44 respondents. After conducting 20 interviews, the team reassessed representation and focused efforts on reaching under-represented groups in order to include a sample that closely resembled the overall pool. Table A-1 shows the composition of the overall pool and the composition of the sample that was ultimately reached for the interviews.

**Table A-1: Overall Pool compared to Interview Sample**

	Overall Pool, N=44			Sample, N=30	
	Boston	Outside of Boston		Boston	Outside of Boston
<b>female</b>	29.5%	34.1%	<b>female</b>	26.7%	36.7%
<b>male</b>	9.1%	27.3%	<b>male</b>	13.3%	23.3%

The data in Table A-1 suggest that the interview sample was a close fit to the overall pool from which the young people were selected.

### **The Interviews and Analysis**

A Follow-up Interview Protocol was developed by BNRA in close collaboration with a team from The Food Project. Questions were tied directly to the research goals, and were designed to be open-ended to allow participants to shape their responses based on their own experiences. All of the sections started with a broad, general question asking participants to describe their experience with The Food Project, what they valued, and whether/how The Food Project changed them or had an impact on them. After the general questions, each section contained a series of prompts and probes to ensure that the same material was covered by everyone. The protocol was carefully designed to try to capture the range of experiences of those involved in the program and the outcomes they believe result from participating. The interview team piloted the protocol with two individuals before it was finalized.

In-depth interviews lasting between 45 minutes and an hour and a half were conducted between May and July 2007. All interviews were immediately written up by the interviewer. These included answers to each of the questions, verbatim quotations, as well as reflections/observations of the interviewer. These write-ups were reviewed by the research team and formed the core of the analysis. Using standard qualitative analysis processes, team members first read through all transcripts and met to discuss emergent themes, findings, and patterns. Next, the team developed a set of codes to represent these themes, and each interview was reviewed again and coded for deeper analysis. These

included demographic and background characteristics, as well as codes for experiences, attitudes, and opinions. All interviews and codes were entered into a database and SPSS was used to analyze the interviews by identifying trends, patterns, and findings that inform The Food Project's work. Write-ups were used again to explore and explain these trends as they are described in the report.

As a supplement to the interviews and to provide additional background information for the coded file and against which to make comparisons, the research team reviewed the application files of the 30 young people that were interviewed. The purpose of this was to collect accurate demographic data (when it was unclear from the interview), confirm information provided during the interviews about program participation and living situations, and to get a sense of the decision-making process TFP staff went through when hiring each youth. All of these types of background variables were used to analyze variation in experiences and outcomes.

To complement what was learned through the interviews BNRA observed program activities and spoke with current Food Project participants in order to gain a better understanding of the program and, thus, the meaning behind reflections of past participants. Twelve (12) youth in the 2007 SYP participated in interviews while working in the fields. Each spent around 20 minutes with an interviewer off to the side of the fields privately answering questions about their experiences. A large group of the summer interns—17 young people—participated in focus groups with a member of the research team. Additionally, the research team interviewed organizational and program leaders who were most closely involved with youth programming at TFP. Finally, preliminary findings were presented to a team from The Food Project and a discussion ensued in which staff reflected on what they heard. These reflections were used to deepen analysis and provide additional context for interpreting and understanding findings.

Together these data sources provided the heart of the analysis and findings presented in this report.

## APPENDIX B: Charts

The following pages provide charts that show data described in the report. This includes the following:

- Chart B-1: Percentage of respondents indicating items are the most valuable part of the experience
- Chart B-2: Percentage of respondents indicating items are the least valuable part of the experience
- Chart B-3: Percentage of respondents providing this impact as an “unprovoked response” to the impact questions
- Chart B-4: Percentage of respondents indicating this as a specific outcome

When reviewing these charts, bear in mind that the number of respondents is 30 and respondents could list one or more than one answer. And, with such small numbers, the data on these charts are suggestive of trends, and not meant to be interpreted as representative of the organization’s outcomes as a whole, as might be inferred from a large-scale survey and quantitative analysis.