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# Aspirations and Reality: How Can We Bridge the Gap?

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University of California at Berkeley  
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**ASPIRATIONS AND REALITY: HOW CAN WE BRIDGE THE GAP?**

TF-006

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Preface

This paper attempts to summarize the ideas, perceptions, and expectations of seventeen Oakland youth regarding the topic of work experience. It is based on their responses to an open-ended interview which I conducted over the telephone and in person during the Summer of 1988. The purpose of the one-to-one interviews was to gather youth input into the design of a Work Experience Survey. Their perceptions about the world of work, the possibilities of finding a good job in Oakland, and their overall outlook about their role in the adult world were among the questions asked. Youth's suggestions about what would constitute an insightful and useful survey strongly shaped its final format. The survey was distributed to high schools during the summer session of 1988. It is important to note that the ideas of only 17 youths were representative of the 226 youth surveyed. It is equally important to discuss, in retrospect, how much more fortuitous and tangible research becomes when youth input is included in the process.

***"Most jobs are found by accident."***

*-14 yr. old Far West High School student, female*

***"If I really wanted to, I could get any job I want."***

*-16 yr. old Skyline Hills High School student, male*

The above two statements reflect a dichotomy. While the first Oakland youth compared job-hunting and gaining work experience to chance, the second Oakland youth likened it to choice. The first Oakland youth describes herself as an average student in Far West High School

in West Oakland. She had been raised in a one-parent, low-income household. The second youth is a student in Skyline High School and describes himself as an honors student. He belongs to a family of professionals and high achievers. Income classifications differentiate the students. Their disparate sets of expectations regarding the world of work also sets the two apart. When posed with the "what do you really want to be when you grow up?" question, however, their responses did not reflect a dichotomy. Both students expressed an abounding respect for achievement. They wanted to go to college and do well. Work was a "VIP ticket to experience", and experience, according to the students, undoubtedly eased youth toward adulthood. Youth believed that the world of work was an adult's domain. Nevertheless, the students wanted to participate and make an impact while in it. Students stressed that their overwhelming desire to work was not simply fueled by a need to alleviate teenage boredom.

Given that students from disparate backgrounds share the same aspirations, why is it that most of them are extremely pessimistic while few are overly confident about the possibilities of finding a job? Work experience survey results highlighted the gap that existed between youth's strong ambitions and their knowledge about what it takes to make ambitions happen. This dichotomy suggests that many youths do not believe that small, incremental steps will lead them to larger goals. They cannot envision, for instance, that the organizational and time management skills acquired as a restaurant employee will condition them into an organized and punctual manager in a district attorney's office. One youth laughingly commented that it had never occurred to him that knowing when to put french fries in hot oil while preparing cheeseburgers and taking a record-breaking twenty-three orders in one hour was an organizational skill. He sensed, however, that punctuality was an important discipline and that acquiring it improves with practice.

The survey also determined that Oakland youth know that professional careers require additional schooling. They are not, however, acquiring the school and work experiences that drive this knowledge closer to reality. The students interviewed attest to this fact. Many of them felt that the jobs available today do not inspire them to pursue a college education tomorrow. They cannot see themselves five years down the line as theatre arts majors, relating stories of their first jobs as ushers in Oakland theatres. Students who defined themselves as college-bound and working in jobs that closely paralleled what they wanted to study in college had difficulty linking their acquired work skills to their aspirations. One student's question attests to this dichotomy best: ***"After graduation, how will I market my expertise in Earth Sciences to an employer. Will he even know what Earth Sciences is?"***

Students who expressed little or no desire to go to college felt that the available jobs in Oakland do not foster transferable skills—skills that will be required in a future job—to those who are not going to use a degree as insurance to a job. These skills include organizational and time management and one-to-one and group communication. skills. The female students, for instance, felt that office-related work could be more meaningful if interpersonal skills were fostered as well as tested. Oftentimes, student clerical workers are placed in the back of office rooms, generating the same number of pages as the older temporaries in the front office. The temps are not only paid higher wages, but they also gain interactive skills. The student workers, on the other hand, are isolated and bored, growing ever resentful at being paid less for producing an equal amount of work.

The gap between aspirations and reality introduces several other gaps: 1) between the image of the job and the content of the job; 2) between actions and the rewards they entail; and 3) between finding a job "by accident" and planning this "accident." The Skyline Hills student

represents a youth who isn't confounded by an aspirations and reality gap. He has inherited, along with his economic and social privileges, the confident belief that he can transform his image of the future into reality, continue to be rewarded for his actions, and live a life that he can, to an extent, control. A majority of Oakland youths are not of this privileged class. Most of them perceive the world of work in two contradictory arenas: a world of fast food jobs or a world of wheeling-and-dealing executive jobs. Young, and economically-privileged employees belong to the former. Young, but economically-privileged employees, as well as well-trained adults, belong to the latter.

Despite the gaps, a majority of youths share the same admiration for achievement. This is not surprising because most of them have been raised in a culture that promotes and rewards success without necessarily defining its relationship to self-esteem, self-empowerment, and overall contribution to the larger society. Reconciling the dichotomy between aspirations and reality entails bridging the gap between the three areas mentioned above. Youth must understand that becoming the "idyllic" doctor or fashion model involves long hours of dedication to people. They must be able to differentiate between both the negative consequences and the positive rewards of being a well-respected doctor or model.

Oakland youth need to grasp the direct relationship between actions and their consequences. Do youth believe that there are rewards inherent in working as a children's book salesman, library attendant, or fast-food cook? Selling one book requires a sharpening of persuasive verbal and presentation skills. Organizing the subject catalog in a library exposes one to various disciplines of study, Earth Sciences included. Working as a fast-food cook instills in one the ability to work under pressure while maintaining patience. An even larger question reiterates a

recurring theme among Education and Youth Panel discussions: "Do youth believe that they realistically fit in the system? Does working in a library or fast-food restaurant cement this belief?" Providing youth with information on the availability of jobs or the address of an excellent job referral service is not enough. Youth need reliable support, assistance, and living models who are willing to build sustained relationships with youth. Adults must not only provide them with information about programs which will build skills and help them expand their horizons. They should also interpret this information to youth as well as instill in them the belief that actively seeking help is a form of taking control of one's immediate future. By knowing where potentially promising jobs are offered, and preparing themselves by practicing interviewing techniques, etc., youth need not necessarily find jobs by accident.

While some ideal jobs are truly found by accident, most of them can be found by "planning" this accident. Work experience programs can play an effective role in helping youth acquire skills in preparation for their ideal jobs. This brings into the discussion the accessibility of work experience programs and introduces the dichotomy issue once again. Some youths feel that finding out about work experience programs is an accidental experience while others believe the opposite. One student stated that the names of work experience counselors and job-skill modules were only vaguely familiar. She explains: "

*"Getting a good job is the result of just plain being at the right place at the right time. Smart people ought to know that we're up to our heads enough trying to survive in school. Running around Oakland trying to market ourselves to inconsiderate work experience directors who think we ask stupid questions only takes time away from finishing an English essay assignment. I'd rather be working on a boring essay than be talked down to by a work experience director!"*

Another student firmly expressed an opposite set of expectations. After stating that he knew about most of the programs, he expressed the following opinion:

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***"If a student chooses to be informed, he can pursue information about available programs. They're out there. I think most of my classmates are just lazy".***

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This student, however, has never lived a life of dichotomy. His aspirations and his concept of reality have always been intact, a reality he's inherited from an economically and socially-privileged family which has instilled in him the confidence to make this connection.

As concerned adults, can we help Oakland youth make this connection? As committed adults, can we help Oakland youth bridge the gap?