



Jobs, Leadership & Optimism: A Report on the Long-Term Impact of the WOW Farm Youth Internship Program

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Introduction

The WOW Farm Internship Program was founded in 2012 and is one of the programs operated by Game Theory Academy, an Oakland-based non-profit that uses innovative strategies to pursue its mission of improving personal finance habits, developing decision-making skills, and providing economic opportunities for low-income youth. WOW serves as a model for maximizing urban green space and benefiting local teens by offering three 12-week internship cycles throughout the year, assisting nearly 50 area young people annually who need access to both the immediate benefits from having a job and the chronic advantages that purposeful employment provides for building a brighter future.

Interns work on the farm for six hours per week and spend an additional two hours per week in the classroom, where they learn the principles of operating a business, making strategic decisions, and managing money. The WOW program uses the urban farm as a laboratory in which students build an awareness of impactful connections: between their personal experience and the diverse backgrounds of their coworkers from around the area, between current actions and future goals, and between entrepreneurship and the formal economy, among others. The intensity of the program attaches interns to aspects of society from which they typically feel excluded, and the experience gained sets them apart from their peers, which in turn helps them succeed in their future academic and professional endeavors.

Methods

Fifteen former WOW Farm students agreed to participate in an in-person interview, which varied in length from 30-60 minutes. The interviews were recorded, transcribed either manually by the interviewer or via Amazon's Mechanical Turk online service, and coded using nVivo's qualitative data analysis software. Students were paid \$20-30 for their participation. The amount of time that has passed since the WOW Farm experience varied by student, with a minimum of one year and a maximum of four years. Of the 15 interviewees, only three of the students were still in high school when the interview occurred. At the time of the study, GTA had current contact information for 45 program alumni.

While the interviews covered a range of topics, the analysis focused less on students' outcomes and more on WOW Farm's *unique contribution* to these outcomes, i.e., how a student's experience changed their internal makeup or external choices. What follows, then, is not merely an accounting of the personal, academic, and professional histories of the participants, but an examination of how the trajectory of these histories have changed since the internship.

the WOW experience created a substantial change to their academic or career path – changes that include enrolling in college, changing their field of study/interest, or switching jobs. There are several examples of this from the interviews, from statements such as “it motivated me to do my best in school” to a female interviewee who feels that the WOW experience both “helped me get into” college and assisted in “figuring out what exactly I want to go to school for” after enrollment. All told, these patterns suggest that the comprehensive and hands-on nature of the WOW internship sustains its impact over the long term.

Stated Goal #2: Leadership Skill Development



An increase in professionalism at one’s own academic and professional tasks is highly beneficial, but the WOW program also strives for its interns to elevate their progress to another level: becoming effective leaders and managers of others. By placing students into consequential situations and encouraging them to extend their personal boundaries and professional capacities, the WOW internship provides the type of experience in which students gain the perspective and maturity necessary to guide their classmates and coworkers. On this front, the program appears to be highly successful.

For example, 10 of the 15 interviewees mentioned that they had earned leadership roles within a job, class, or organization since leaving WOW Farm; these roles range from becoming shift manager at a national chain restaurant, to being voted captain of a high school sports team, to obtaining a Resident Assistance post at a 4-year university (a highly-competitive position that brings it free room-and-board for the student), among others. Beyond these more tangible measures of leadership success, there are less-tactile pieces of evidence, including students frequently expressing admiration for WOW Farm personnel’s own leadership styles and their eagerness to use these observed habits in their own lives, such as the student who came to understand that “even though you’re a leader, you have things you still need to work on.” Moreover, this affinity was not limited to a single person or an individual aspect of the program; the thoroughness with which WOW’s leaders displayed sound management principles appears to be a crucial element for instilling them in students.

Perhaps the most symbolically representative aspect of the leadership journey that WOW students take is a significantly increased interest in becoming entrepreneurs: on no less than 12 occasions over the course of the interviews, students reported an enhanced desire to start a business, volunteer project, or student organization, and credited their WOW experience for catalyzing this desire. These included instances in which interviewees stated that “before WOW, I wasn’t really into teams, but after WOW, I’d much rather start a business with someone else” and “before [WOW], I was only going to go to culinary school, but knowing about the business...brought out more, so that’s why I want to major in business.” While many of these students are waiting to finish their education before putting these plans into place, several other

graduates have already realized their goal, which speaks to both the vision and the sense of urgency that WOW Farm develops in its interns.

Stated Goal #3: Personal Finance Habits



Another explicit objective of the WOW Farm program is to educate students on the value of managing their personal finances in a mindful way. This objective is believed to work on two levels: helping students from modest backgrounds utilize their comparatively more limited resources more efficiently, and training students' minds to approach difficult choices with a thoughtful and systematic process. Based on the interview responses, it appears that WOW interns used the tools they learned to

operate on both of these levels.

When viewing interview responses overall, the improvement in personal financial habits is one of the more consistent findings that pertain to the declared goals of the WOW program. More specifically, over half of the interviewees provided feedback about how their approach improved in each of three key areas of personal finance: increased instances of making a budget (nine of 15 students), generalized money management (nine of 15) and increased instances of saving (11 of 15). Moreover, these reports were not limited to a single instance or a temporary shift – the vast majority of these respondents spoke of multiple occasions at different points in time since their WOW experience.

Perhaps more importantly, 14 of the 15 students interviewed for this reported that their financial planning, goal-setting, and decision-making – with over 30 distinct instances being mentioned in total. All told, this preponderance strongly suggests that WOW Farm internships have a more wide-ranging effect on the students who participate in them. That is, it impacts the more chronic nature of personal financial management by imbuing them with a more thoughtful financial mindset. Examples of this mindset change include statements such as “I used to make a lot of rash decisions...now I think things through more” and “instead of splurging and then regretting it, I think about it for a while” and, perhaps most directly, “in everything I do now, I always have my economic lens on.”

Unstated Outcome #1: Emotional Optimism

Beyond the stated goals of the program, WOW alumni displayed growth in two unexpected but critical ways, the first of which is a significant improvement to their personal attitudes and inward-looking state of mind. Namely, students experienced a boost in how they view themselves, their coursework and employment situations, and their prospects for the future.



More specifically, WOW students reported elevated levels of internal measures such as self-knowledge (“I learned that I do best when I have multiple things on my plate rather than when I have down time”), ambition (“do it right, and you’re getting two benefits...you’re getting paid and you’re learning at the same time”), work ethic (“when I was younger, I didn’t see having a job as a main focus. I was more into getting into trouble. I feel like WOW Farm just helped me have a work ethic a want to do things”), and enthusiasm for job-related tasks (“I learned to do what you love, and if you do what you love, then it will pay off in the end”). The most common example of how the emotional health of students improved was in the area of self-confidence, for which 12 of the 15 interviewees reported a significant increase caused by their WOW experience. As one student put it:

I feel like it just opened the door to me really knowing that I could be a productive citizen in society. Just me having a job, and not hanging out on the streets, opened my mind to wanting to be a productive citizen.

There were numerous reasons for these patterns provided by the interview participants, but perhaps the most commonly mentioned cause was the notion that WOW was a “real” or “grownup” job in which students were given autonomy, respect, and duties that were distributed both horizontally and vertically.

Along with a variety of causes, an assortment of outcomes stem from this emotional improvement. Some of the more intriguing and unexpected outcomes include a commitment to environmental causes, eating organic and/or local food, and enthusiasm spending time outdoors – all of which were reported by interviewees long after their WOW internship ended, but none of which would necessarily be expected to occur over such a longitudinal timeframe. It is not surprising, then, that several students chose to pursue college studies in programs that parallel their WOW experience, such as horticulture, agronomy, environmental studies, culinary arts, and economics, among others.

Unstated Outcome #2: Socioemotional Growth



The second area of unexpected growth revolves around the way that WOW participants connect with those around them. In short, interview responses suggest that WOW students improved both how they relate to others personally and how they view interpersonal dynamics generally, and they did so at the one-on-one, small-group, and community-based levels.

The most frequent example of the interpersonal growth experienced by WOW students is their evolving

understanding of teamwork in a professional setting, as well as the empathy and compromises needed to maintain good working relationships and support optimal performance; these ideas were mentioned by 12 of the 15 interviewees as being markedly enhanced by their WOW internship, including cases in which students reported having learned about “how to listen, communicate, and being open to new ideas without judgment” and “just because I know how to do something doesn’t mean the way [others] know how to do it is wrong.” Two other common themes revealed by interview responses are (A) improved communication skills, highlighted by a recognition for the advantages of listening intentionally and choosing one’s words more carefully when speaking, and (B) increased appreciation for the benefits of workplace diversity, not only along the lines of demographic backgrounds but also along the lines of personal beliefs and attitudes.

No single outcome exemplifies these patterns of relational improvement more than students’ heightened connection to the concept of *community*, be it in the specified form of Oakland or in the generalized form of “keeping things local.” This outcome expressed itself in 17 different ways over the course of the interviews, including where former WOW interns currently shop, how they view regional economies, and whom they support personally and professionally. For example, one student spoke passionately about a mid-summer party put on for neighborhood residents:

We had that party to showcase the flowers. Not only that, but to showcase us. We’re the youth of Oakland and this is what we made ... I believe that most of those people that came, I changed their mind about youth, because most people in my neighborhood think that we just rob people or we’ll shoot people. I’m not even interested in that. I want you to know that I’m interested in my future.

All told, these students articulated a sense that WOW Farm allowed them to peek “behind the curtain,” to get a sense for the inner workings of businesses and all the considerations that running one entails. The perspective gained by this newfound knowledge has fundamentally altered how they view the world around them.

Conclusion

Based on the responses given during the 15 interviews conducted for this report, the WOW Farm internship program both achieves its stated goals and provides several ancillary benefits. Moreover, literature from the field of youth empowerment and personal finance suggests that these outcomes are likely to have significant, positive, and long-lasting effects on students who access the WOW Farm experience. The most notable pattern observed during the interviews is the diversity of the positive results and the varied nature of their downstream impact: it is quite probable that these effects will help students improve their academic standing, career performance, and personal growth for years to come.



About the Author: Tim St. Louis received a Bachelor's degree in finance from UW-Madison, and worked in banking for several years upon graduation. While working in the private sector, Tim performed volunteer work with high school students in some of Chicago's housing projects, inspiring him to leave the corporate world and become a math teacher in under-resourced high schools. The classroom teaching experience created a desire to attack some of the larger and more structural issues facing working-class students, and Tim has since earned two Master's degrees (education leadership, public policy) and a PhD (higher education) in this pursuit. He has completed research fellowships on behalf of local, state, and federal agencies, the Federal Reserve Bank, and in the non-profit sector. His focus areas are personal finance decision-making, lowering the financial barriers to college access, and alleviating the financial stressors that impede college success.

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