

# **Executive Summary:**

## **Program Survey and Evaluation for *The Future Is Mine***

Prepared by Melissa Swauger, PhD

Assistant Professor, Indiana University of Pennsylvania

August 2009

---

Too often, students are expected to graduate knowing what they want to be and how to get there. Implicit in the expectation are assumptions not only that high school graduates understand the educational or training requirements of their chosen occupations, but also that they've made their choices with knowledge of the options available to them. In reality, most students need far more guidance. They need exposure to the myriad careers in today's complex labor market; they need the time and support to make informed decisions; and they need help during their secondary school careers to begin developing transferable and marketable skills.

The Consortium for Public Education offers a program called *The Future Is Mine* (TFIM) that reaches into high schools to connect students to authentic career exploration experiences. Now in its ninth year, TFIM helps students focus on learning to identify and develop career paths — from accessing appropriate academic or training opportunities to packaging skills and understanding the intricacies of job searches and employment. TFIM's overarching goal is to help all students find their passion and pursue their dreams, but in an informed way that will lead to future success.

Each year, nearly 1,000 students from 24 school districts participate in TFIM. Through their three annual self-directed projects, two of which are team endeavors designed to reach peers and younger students, thousands more students in these districts realize benefits from TFIM. This year at the Annual Student Leadership Conference, TFIM retained an evaluator to survey more than 300 of TFIM's student participants and their advisors. Of the total, 197 students and 27 advisors responded. The survey was designed to better understand students' experiences and assess TFIM's impact. The student and advisor surveys consisted of 25 multiple choice and several open-ended questions aimed at examining the three major focal areas of the TFIM program, including career awareness and education, leadership, and civic engagement. Following is a summary of the findings.

### **Program Outcomes**

The Consortium's recruitment efforts have brought together students and educators from five counties and 24 school districts. The Consortium strives to make TFIM an inclusive initiative ensuring that all students—college bound, vocational-technical students, general education, and special needs students—are provided with the resources necessary to make educated decisions concerning their futures. No other school-based program affords students the opportunity to explore careers, develop skills and abilities that impact them and their communities, and establish peer relationships across the region. As one student survey respondent asserted, "*TFIM has been a rewarding experience that has helped me understand my community and [possible]*

*careers; the friendships I've made will last forever.*" An overwhelming number of students (94%) enjoy participating in TFIM enough that they would recommend participation in the program to other students.

Advisors also appreciate the value of the program as evidenced by their continuing participation; approximately 30% have served as their school's representatives in TFIM for six years or more. Through TFIM, teachers are afforded opportunities to come together to share best practices, discuss challenges and ways to address them, and partner to provide resources for students on a regional level. More important, and perhaps more influential in the consistency and longevity of their participation, is the satisfaction they experience in seeing their students gain insights and skills they'll need to live productive and fulfilling lives. One advisor's comment typified a feeling expressed by many: *"It has afforded me the opportunity to see so many students come out of their shells and shine!"* Advisors enjoyed participating in TFIM so much that 94% of them said they would recommend participation in the program to colleagues and 79% rated TFIM as being superior to other co-curricular activities offered to students in their schools.

### **Career Exploration and Awareness**

The major goal of TFIM is to foster career awareness and exploration skills through student-initiated, driven, and executed projects, including two requiring outreach to peers and younger students. Among them have been a coloring book designed to teach elementary students about vocational-technical education; numerous school career fairs; creation of an inviting, comfortable, career resource center; and countless job shadowing experiences various enough to include pediatricians, disc jockeys, and chemists.

Students were asked a series of questions concerning the extent to which TFIM has helped them learn about careers and explore their interests. Response options were based on a scale of 1-4 with 1="Not at all," 2="Very little," 3="Somewhat," and 4="Very." On all of the questions, students overwhelmingly responded positively indicating TFIM has been Somewhat (3) or Very (4) instrumental in fostering career exploration and awareness.

The percentages of students responding 3 or 4 on each question is summarized in Table 1 and as follows:

- Over 81% of students responded positively (Somewhat or Very) that TFIM has been instrumental in helping them learn about careers that match their ability and interests;
- 85.2% said that TFIM has helped them better understand the training and education required for specific jobs;
- 87.8% responded positively that TFIM has helped them better understand the aptitude and personal qualities necessary for a particular career;
- 91.3% said that TFIM has helped them learn about career opportunities in the Pittsburgh region;

- 91.4% that the program has helped them better understand the expectations of specific jobs/ careers of interest;
- 67.6% said that TFIM has helped them meet people in careers of interest;
- 73.7% have benefited from TFIM helping them understand processes of getting a job; and
- 86.3% said that TFIM has helped them make a connection between classroom learning and the world of work.

Various responses to open-ended questions support these data, e.g. *“It has taught me a wide array of jobs available at a specific job site and the many different jobs that would be suitable for me;”* and *“TFIM has helped me understand more of the career opportunities in Pittsburgh. I have never heard of some of the careers at places like PNC Park,”* and *“This event and program enhances my networking skills and broke me out of my shell.”*

As Table 1 also indicates, advisors agree that TFIM is developing their students’ career awareness and exploration skills, with responses averaging 85% to 100% for the same questions. That advisor and student responses coincide further demonstrates that TFIM is meeting career awareness and exploration goals in the eyes of both advisors *and* students. Advisors’ responses to open-ended questions also support these data. In a representative comment, one advisor said, *“[TFIM] exposes students to many different careers and opportunities in their area.”*

**Table 1: Percent of Positive Responses to Career Awareness and Exploration Survey Questions**

		Learn about careers that match interest and ability	Understand training/ed required for specific careers	Understand aptitude and personal qualities for career	Learn more about career opportunities in region	Understand job expectations	Meet people in a career that interests me	Understand processes of getting a job	Connection between classroom learning and work
<b>% of Student Responses</b>									
	Very	32.5	29.9	35.5	54.8	52.3	30.5	23.4	36.0
	Somewhat	48.7	55.3	52.3	36.5	39.1	37.1	50.3	50.3
	<b>Total</b>	<b>81.2</b>	<b>85.2</b>	<b>87.8</b>	<b>91.3</b>	<b>91.4</b>	<b>67.6</b>	<b>73.7</b>	<b>86.3</b>
<b>% of Advisor Responses</b>									
	Very	63.0	51.9	37.0	81.5	51.9	40.7	44.4	48.1
	Somewhat	33.0	48.1	59.3	18.5	40.7	44.4	40.7	40.7
	<b>Total</b>	<b>99.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>96.3</b>	<b>99.0</b>	<b>92.6</b>	<b>85.1</b>	<b>85.1</b>	<b>88.8</b>

## Implications

One of the first steps in youth career development is an assessment of students’ interests, aptitudes, and skills; students who discover and pursue their interests are more likely to successfully meet their career goals. Table 1 indicates that students overwhelmingly perceive TFIM as instrumental in helping them learn about their interests and careers that match their interests. Once students learn about their interests, they can begin to learn more specifically about the aptitudes, qualities, and training required for a specific career. By responding positively to these questions, TFIM students indicate they are learning about jobs available in the labor market as well as the skills required for these jobs; the results indicate they are gaining the

insights needed to make both informed short-term career decisions, (e.g., choosing particular classes and extracurricular activities), as well as long-term decisions, (e.g., helping them chose appropriate post-secondary training).

TFIM students also overwhelmingly indicate an increased awareness of jobs available in the region, which could have a tremendous impact on their decisions about whether to stay in the Pittsburgh area. Making students aware of the region's job opportunities clearly holds benefits from an economic development standpoint because Pittsburgh's leadership has long expressed concerns over the exodus of its young population.

In addition, TFIM students indicate they are learning job-seeking skills, a priority for the Pennsylvania Department of Education and the local Three Rivers Workforce Investment Board, both of which set and/or monitor work readiness standards and competencies for youth in the state and/or region.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, TFIM students indicate the program is helping them see a connection between school and work. By exposing students to job shadowing opportunities, professionals in their fields of interests, and learning that has a community impact, TFIM is fostering both meaningful learning experiences and positive outcomes.

### **Leadership Skills**

TFIM also seeks to foster leadership skills. Projects designed to achieve this goal have included tours that TFIM participants organized for elementary students to vocational education sites; career exploration days offered by high school students for middle school students; an orientation offered by high school students to upcoming freshmen; and mock interview opportunities and career aspiration inventories that TFIM students arranged for senior-year students.

To learn more about how TFIM is reaching the goal of developing leadership skills, students were asked to respond to five questions, centering on initiative in their work and working positively with peers. Table 2 summarizes their responses. On a scale of 1-4 with 1="Not at all," 2="Very little," 3="Somewhat," and 4="Very", students overwhelmingly responded positively on all of the questions indicating TFIM has been Somewhat (3) or Very (4) instrumental in fostering leadership skills. The percentages of students responding 3 or 4 on each question is summarized in Table 2 and as follows:

- 80.7% of students responded that TFIM has been instrumental in fostering their public speaking skills;
- 67.5% responded positively that TFIM has helped them become better at planning meetings;
- 94.4% responded that TFIM has helped them work better with a team;
- 88.3% believed that TFIM is helping them set a positive example for peers and younger students; and
- 84.2% responded that TFIM has been instrumental in helping them obtain information they need to complete their work.

Open-ended responses support these data. Among other observations students said: *“It has taught me how to work with others better, be a more positive person with a positive attitude, make friends and experience different sessions and learn about different careers;”* and *“The Future Is Mine helped me learn to work with a team. It also helped me learn to compromise for what is best for my group.”*

Similarly, advisor responses on these same questions ranged from 88.9% to 96.3% (see Table 2), indicating that advisors believe students are being prepared not only to take initiative in their work, but also to work positively with peers. As advisors indicated in open-ended responses, TFIM is instrumental in *“helping students experience growth in leadership roles that otherwise may not have presented themselves,”* and TFIM *“increases student self-esteem and allows students who would otherwise not be involved interact to have an amazing opportunity.”*

**Table 2: Percent of Positive Responses to Leadership Survey Questions**

		Speaking to groups and presenting ideas	Planning meetings	Work with a team	Set a positive example for peers and younger students	Obtain information needed to complete work
<b>% of Student Responses</b>						
	Very	36.5	20.8	62.4	54.3	41.6
	Somewhat	44.2	46.7	32.0	34.0	42.6
	<b>Total</b>	<b>80.7</b>	<b>67.5</b>	<b>94.4</b>	<b>88.3</b>	<b>84.2</b>
<b>% of Advisor Responses</b>						
	Very	70.4	25.9	88.9	81.5	51.9
	Somewhat	22.2	70.4	7.4	14.8	37.0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>92.6</b>	<b>96.3</b>	<b>96.3</b>	<b>96.3</b>	<b>88.9</b>

## Implications

The development of leadership skills is important for positive school experiences and helping students make responsible career and life decisions. Student responses indicate that TFIM is fostering these skills. Through projects that are conceptualized and developed by students, for students, they feel more confident in their decision-making and that they are better at communicating and getting along with others. TFIM gives students the opportunity to serve as leaders in presenting their ideas to peers, younger students, adults, and employers. Because students manage their own projects, they learn skills such as setting goals and managing time. These interpersonal experiences allow them to develop relationships with others, take responsibility, and build valuable connections to adults. Employers want workers who lead and can work with and inspire others. Because they engage in such experiential learning offered through TFIM, students are coming to a better understanding of their own values and skills as well as being motivated to take on leadership roles. The leadership skills fostered by TFIM should extend to other aspects of students’ lives and well into adulthood.

## School and Community Engagement

TFIM also strives to encourage students to make a difference in their communities and schools. For example, during TFIM's Annual Student Leadership Conference, one group of students visiting Urban Design Associates redesigned the entire town of Braddock using scale models and maps, while another visiting Allegheny County Chief Executive Dan Onorato's office drew up a balanced budget for the county. During the academic year, a group of students worked with the Young Preservationists Association of Pittsburgh to improve the town of Brownsville, while another worked on a project to improve their school with existing resources.

This survey reveals that students believe TFIM is enhancing their school and civic engagement. Table 3 summarizes the responses to all questions asked to measure the extent to which TFIM has been instrumental in developing students' awareness and engagement in school and community cultures. On a scale of 1-4 with 1="Not at all," 2="Very little," 3="Somewhat," and 4="Very" students overwhelmingly responded positively indicating TFIM has been Somewhat (3) or Very (4) instrumental in fostering school and community engagement. The percentages of students responding 3 or 4 on each question is summarized in Table 3 and as follows:

- 88.8% of students believed that TFIM has been instrumental in helping them become more involved in their school or community;
- 87.9% responded that TFIM has helped them believe they can make a difference in their school or community; and
- 90.9% of students believe that TFIM has helped them be more respectful of others.

In response to open-ended questions that support these data, students variously stated, *"It has helped me out with my future and figuring out what I can do to better my community and help other people or kids make their future bright;"* and *"I learned that not all people have the same views or opinion as I do but I should respect them."*

Advisors also felt that TFIM prepares students to identify and address issues of public concern, as indicated by responses on these same questions, which ranged from 89.3% to 92.9%. One advisor's comments, typical of others, summarized these sentiments: *"TFIM gets the students to actually think about their communities, schools, and futures rather than just taking everything for granted. TFIM shows them that community members and organizations truly care about youth."*

**Table3: Percent of Positive Responses to School and Community Engagement Survey Questions**

		More involved in school or community	Believe I can make a difference	More respectful of others not like me
<b>% of Student Responses</b>				
	Very	46.2	50.3	57.9
	Somewhat	42.6	37.6	33.0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>88.8</b>	<b>87.9</b>	<b>90.9</b>
<b>% of Advisor Responses</b>		More involved in school or community	Believe I can make a difference	More respectful of others not like me
	Very	53.6	46.4	50.0
	Somewhat	39.3	42.9	39.3
	<b>Total</b>	<b>92.9</b>	<b>89.3</b>	<b>89.3</b>

### **Implications**

In their book Youth Participation and Community Engagement (2006), Barry Checkoway and Lorraine Gutierrez noted, “There is abundant research attesting to the lack of opportunities young people have for meaningful involvement in the civic life of their communities.” Moreover, contributions of young people often are ignored or young people feel apathetic about participating in community. School and community engagement helps students prepare for their roles in a democratic society. Through projects that emphasize social responsibility, TFIM helps students learn more about their own values; value perspectives different from their own and take initiative and action in solving school or community problems. In so doing, they connect with adults in the community, expand their social networks, and learn to express themselves; they develop a sense of purpose and belonging. They also gain job-related skills and knowledge, including how organizations, schools, and communities are run; how to take into account the needs and perspectives of other stakeholders and how to solve problems. Table 3 indicates that TFIM encourages an awareness and desire to improve schools and communities. When students are engaged in their schools and communities they are more likely to become contributing, self-sufficient adults.

\*Barry Checkoway and Lorraine Gutierrez (2006). Youth Participation and Community Engagement New York: Routledge.