

Winds of Change: Youth Perspectives on Community Recovery

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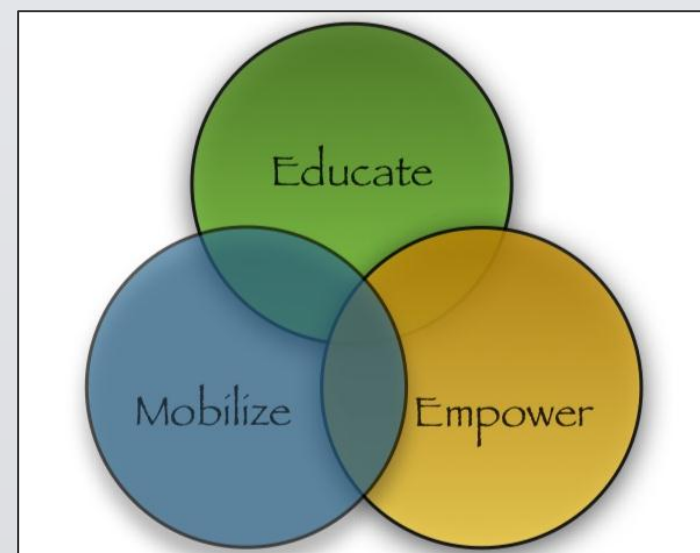


Theoretical Foundation

This student-led project drew upon the theoretical framework of positive youth development, as outlined by Lerner (2004) and others. The positive youth perspective shifts the focus of research and policy from why youth fail to how they succeed and thrive. Within this framework, teens thrive when they have a context that supports their abilities and opportunities to engage productively and positively with their communities. In turn, teens who are thriving engage voluntarily in behaviors that serve the needs of themselves and others in adaptive ways.

Community service represents a developmental opportunity, particularly for at-risk youth at the transition to adulthood. Through meaningful community service and activism, teens can:

- Build positive social networks
- Clarify their values and find a direction
- Develop social competence
- Develop a sense that they can make significant contributions to their peers and their broader community and society



Objectives and Overview

Winds of Change was a series of youth-led discussions and educational exhibits addressing the experience of the April 27th, 2011 tornado and the recovery priorities for the Holt community and its neighbors. As an event for youth and by youth, Winds of Change was designed to add the missing youth perspective to discussions regarding community recovery. Among the topics addressed were:

- commercial and economic needs of the Holt community
- youth-oriented employment and work training needs
- community history and vision for future
- recreational alternatives
- public transportation and infrastructure
- community representation and governance

There were also videos, art, and photographs of Holt by youth related to tornado and their community.

All exhibits were created by and hosted by high school and middle school School students with mentoring by UA undergraduate psychology students under the direction of Dr. Jeffrey G. Parker.

Goals

- Add the missing youth perspective and voice to the process of community recovery following the April 27th tornado
- Give youth the same sense of ownership over the recovery process that adult community members had been enjoying
- Enhance the personal and organizational skills of the youth
- Foster youths' spirit of community engagement and sense of civic responsibility
- Enhance the broader positive profile of Holt High School, the community, and youth as citizens

Dates

Winds of Change event was held at Holt High School on the 18th – 20th of April 2012. There was a Community Open House the evening of April 19th.

Program

The event included a set of youth-led discussions, surveys, and educational exhibits. Exhibits were youth-focused and interactive. All activities took place in the auditorium of Holt High School. Participants were students of Holt High School and Davis Emerson Middle School. Over three days, approximately 500 students and 100 community members– including many local and school officials– participated.

Interactive Youth Exhibits

Say it Loud, Say it Proud

Celebrated the voices and vision of Holt youth and their unique perspective on their community.

It included:

- Photographs of community life taken by high school and middle school students
- A video kiosk in which youth record their impressions of their community and what it means to them
- Middle and high school youth art and stories celebrating lives and community
- "A Simple Twist of Fate". Art installation of tornado debris with a living tree commemorating community members lost to the tornado.



All Up in Our Business

Focused on the youth's view of the community's commercial priorities.

Activities included:

- Educational material on youth spending trends nationally and locally
- An interactive map of the community that features photographs of existing, locally-owned businesses in the community and permits youth to suggest the type and locations of desired youth-oriented business after considering potential zoning and other factors
- Large interactive "Yellow Pages" book in which youth select and suggest youth-oriented businesses and other organizations and institutions they would like to see developed

A Voice for Holt

Explored issues of community governance and leadership.

This exhibit included:

- Educational exhibits on the pros and cons of incorporating as a city versus annexation by neighboring Tuscaloosa
- Educational material on the forms of governance in other familiar communities, including the school's sports opponents across the state
- An educational exhibit on the pending highway bypass that will bisect the community
- An interactive map in which youth considered and proposed possible city boundaries
- Voting booths and ballot boxes that permitted the youth to engage in a straw vote concerning whether they favor incorporation as a city or annexation by Tuscaloosa



Going Our Way?

Explored the public transportation needs of the communities of Holt and neighboring Alberta. Of particular interest is the need to address the lack of adequate bus service for community members, especially the elderly.

Activities included:

- Information on Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act concerning nondiscrimination in public transportation
- Information on public transportation options and map of current bus routes in neighboring communities
- Educational material on how communities benefit from public transportation and who utilizes it
- Interactive map permitting youth to express their views on the optimal routes and stops for possible bus service to their community
- Laptop computer that permits youth to write and send emails to local officials to urge them to lobby for or champion the return of bus service to the community.

Back to the Future

Provided a portrait of the past and vision of the future through historical photos and other materials related to the community and Holt High School.

Activities included:

- A wall timeline of Holt history from its founding to the present
- Facts and images of the April 27th tornado
- A community profile and demographics
- Fact or Fiction? An interactive exhibit in which examine purported historical documents and images related to the community and high school and sort the truth from the myths and fabrications.
- "Where were you the day...". Graffiti wall of youth tornado stories
- "Where we are going". An interactive exhibit that permitted youth to express their vision for the future through words and images



Parks and "Wreckreation"

Explored the youth's vision for post-tornado recreational opportunities.

The exhibit included:

- An educational exhibit on nearby Hurricane Creek Nature Preserve including the damage it suffered during the tornado
- Educational material on the health and other benefits of parks and other forms of community recreation for youth and others
- Maps depicting the locations and styles of parks in surrounding communities
- Tree of Hope. A tree salvaged from the tornado debris on which youth pinned their ideas for recreational opportunities for the community
- A photo collage of the two local parks in the Holt area and their current conditions
- An interactive map that permitted surveying the youth for the types of recreational outlets they desire and where they would prefer to locate them in their community



Forces at Work

Designed to obtain the youth's perspective on the employment opportunities they desire and require.

Activities included:

- Educational material on national and local trends in youth employment
- Educational material on the value of part time youth employment to youth
- Informational material on resumes and local job sources
- Information on the college application process
- Educational material on the legalities of youth employment
- An interactive poll that permitted youth to express their priorities for part-time, youth-suitable jobs they'd like to see developed in the community as it recovers from the tornado.



Results

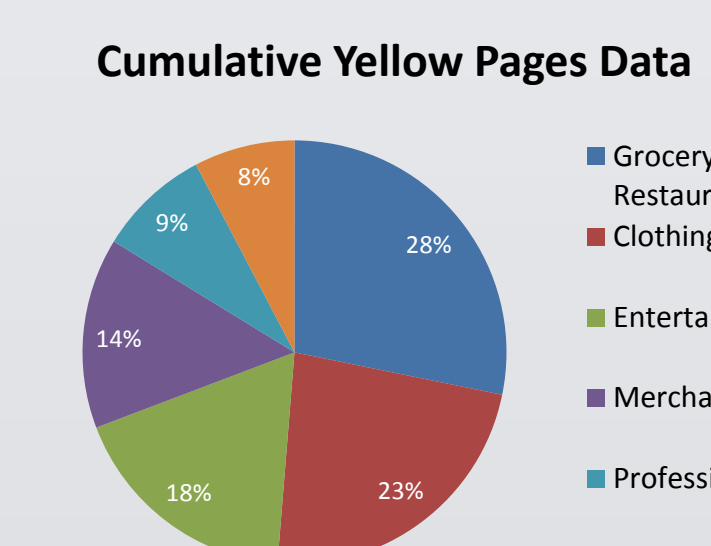
Formal and informal surveys as well as the student's behavior and choices to the interactive exhibits were used to ascertain the students' perspectives on their community's recovery priorities and to draw up a final report distributed to county officials. These results are summarized as follows:

Say it Loud, Say it Proud

- Surveys of student leaders who organized this exhibit reported that the activity and art was a powerful bonding and healing experience for them and the viewers. The results suggest that giving the students the opportunity to express themselves following the tragedy was therapeutic and could be used in the future. However, surveyed students indicated that it would be best if student art could be showcased outside the school in the broader community.

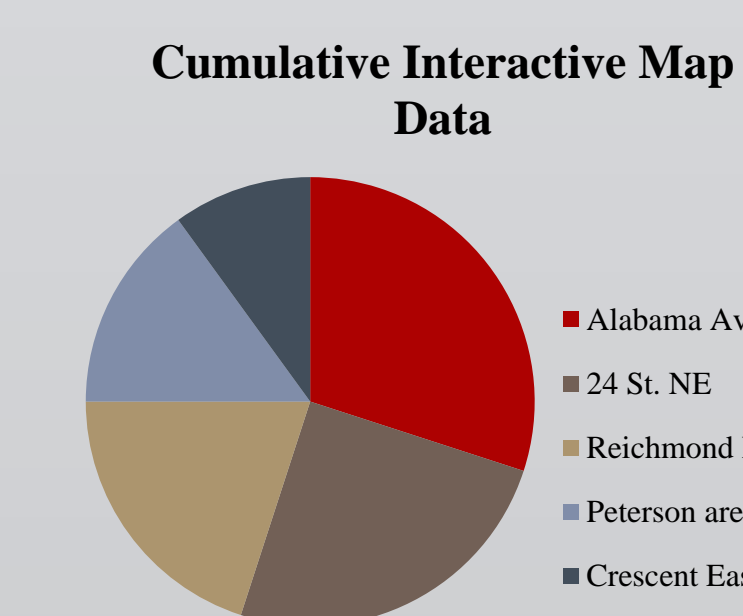
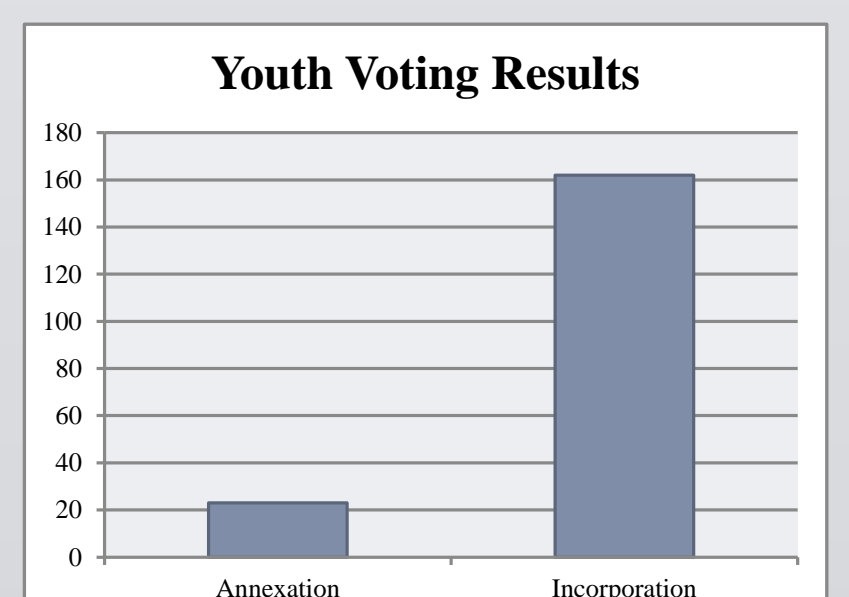
All Up in Our Business

- The majority of the businesses requested by the students reflected an overall youth desire for more food and clothing stores, with these two combined categories representing over 50% of the suggestions.



A Voice for Holt

- Three days of voting by high school and middle school students indicated that a vast majority of the youth preferred incorporation over annexation for Holt (see figure right). The youth's clear preference suggests that the youth see self-governance and self-reliance as important community priorities and are protective of their community's identity.



Going Our Way?

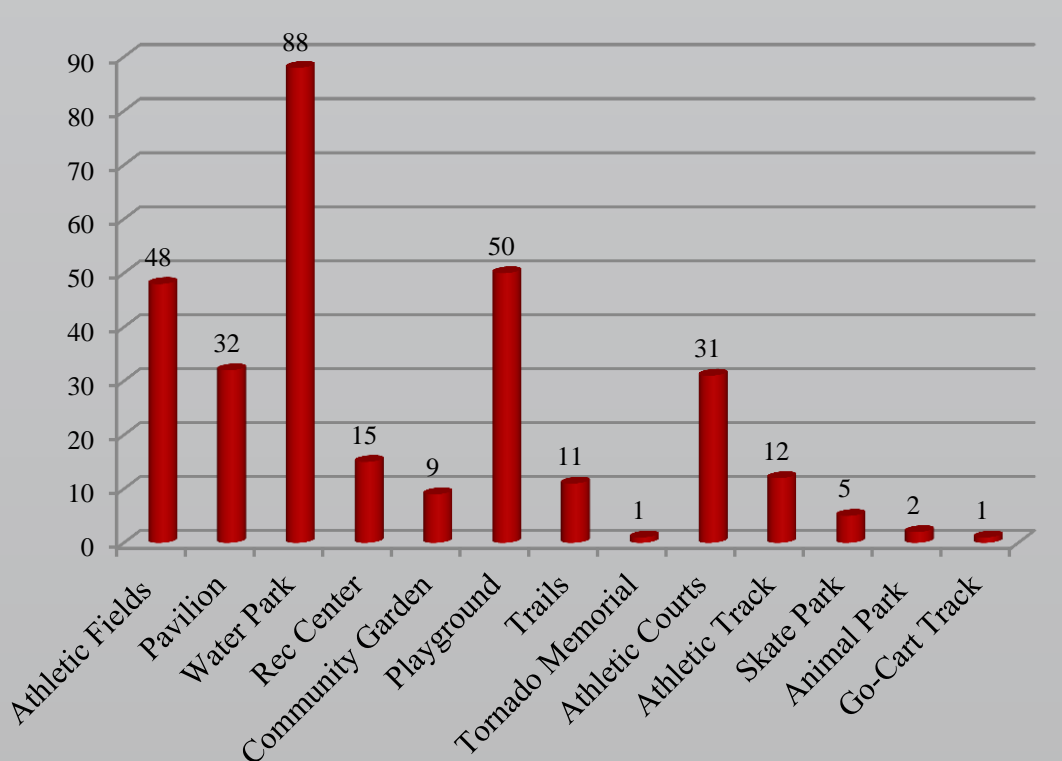
- Over 80 student e-mails were sent to the county commissioners advocating for increased public transportation. Analysis of the geographical placement of bus stops on the interactive map of Holt (see figure left) showed that the youth's ideal location for economic expansion would be focused near the section of 24th Avenue NE and Richmond. This location, to the youth, would give the largest accommodation to Holt residents.

Back to the Future

- Results indicate that the youth did not have much depth in their knowledge of their community's history. The youth embraced the historical exhibit enthusiastically and appeared to acquire a new understanding of their community's past. They also had strong opinions and clear visions of what their community meant to them. The banners from this event containing student comments were later showcased in the cafeteria.

Parks and "Wreckreation"

- The clearest request for recreation focused on water features including a water park, a swimming pool, a pond, or a fountain (see figure right). After this, students requested playground equipment such as swings, slides, and merry-go-rounds. The third most requested was athletic fields, such as football, baseball, and soccer fields.



Forces at Work

- Surveys of the students indicated that most students were interested in the college process rather than entering the workforce right out of high school. They were also very interested in part-time work, but most were unemployed. Results also suggest that assisting youth in finding satisfying part-time employment can strengthen their ties to the community while simultaneously bolstering Holt's economy.

The 2012 Holt High School senior class had the most students going to college than any other year. The students involved in "Winds of Change" wrote about the event in their college applications, and one student won a scholarship based on an essay she wrote about her involvement with the event.

Reference

Lerner, R.M. (2004). *Liberty: Thriving and civic engagement among America's youth*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Sponsor

- UAGraduate School and 22 local and state agencies and businesses