The Sweet Potato Project

Local Evaluation

West Fresno family resource center
Empowering the Community

A member of HUD designated EnVision CENTERS

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Executive Summary

The Sweet Potato Project serves African American youth ages 12-15 in West Fresno through an innovative integration of agricultural entrepreneurship, mental health education, and cultural empowerment. Funded through the California Department of Public Health, Office of Health Equity's California Reducing Disparities Project (CRDP), the program addresses systemic barriers facing Black youth by combining hands-on farming experience with business development skills, leadership training, and behavioral health education.

Operating in one of California's most economically distressed regions, the program serves a community where median household income ($34,147) is half the city average and significantly below the state median. The 36-week curriculum includes 10 life skills lessons covering mental health awareness, substance abuse prevention, violence recognition, and coping strategies, alongside seven agricultural activities teaching sweet potato cultivation, marketing, and business planning.

Research Questions

During the evaluation, the researchers focused their efforts on identifying key data that would support answering the following research/ evaluation questions:

1. Has there been a decrease in the identified maladaptive behaviors?
2. What is the current state of the participants' mental health?
3. Has there been an increase in skill development and achievement?

Participant Demographics

The 2024 cohort included 30 youth participants:

Gender	53% female (n=16), 47% male (n=14)
Race/Ethnicity	93% African American (n=28), 7% Hispanic (n=2)
Age Range	12-15 years old

Key Findings

Academic Achievement

Per program staff, participants demonstrated remarkable academic improvement, with mean GPA increasing from 1.92 at program entry to 3.3 at completion—a 1.38-point gain. This represents a fundamental shift in participants' relationship with formal education and school engagement.

Program Engagement

The program achieved a 90% completion rate for behavioral and mental health curriculum components, with 27 of 30 participants completing all workshop sessions. This high retention demonstrates strong program relevance and participant investment.

Youth Development

Qualitative findings revealed significant growth in:

Confidence and Communication	Leadership Skills	Cultural Humility	Financial Literacy
Parents reported dramatic improvements, with one noting, "My son was shy, now he talks to anyone."	Youth demonstrated enhanced public speaking abilities and comfort engaging with community members.	Participants gained knowledge of Black farming history and agricultural heritage.	Youth learned entrepreneurship fundamentals including marketing, budgeting, investment, and capital management.

Parents and participants identified the program as providing an "escape from everyday life"

Mental Health and Wellness

Parents and participants identified the program as providing an "escape from everyday life" that promotes overall wellness. The program successfully created safe spaces for youth to develop emotional regulation skills, build self-esteem, and form positive peer relationships that extended beyond program settings into school and home environments.

Community Impact

The Sweet Potato Project generated substantial community engagement through public showcases, recipe development competitions, and entrepreneurial presentations. Community members demonstrated detailed knowledge of program outcomes and expressed strong support for the model. The program successfully mobilized diverse community sectors, such as local farmers, business mentors, and educational partners. This created a network of support that reached across multiple stakeholder groups.

Program Strengths

Community-Driven Design

The curriculum reflects authentic community expertise and cultural knowledge rather than externally imposed interventions.

Holistic Approach

Integration of agricultural education, business skills, and mental health awareness addresses multiple development needs simultaneously.

Cultural Responsiveness

The explicit focus on Black agricultural heritage and cultural empowerment builds racial esteem.

Staff Quality

Program success is heavily attributed to staff members who bring deep cultural expertise as members of the same community and extend support beyond formal program activities.

Family Engagement

There is strong parental involvement and parents express satisfaction with youth development outcomes.

Limitations and Challenges

The evaluation relied primarily on qualitative methods due to a consistent assessment protocol not being established at the start of the program. This limits the ability to measure changes in substance use, gang involvement, or clinical mental health indicators. No licensed mental health professionals were available to conduct clinical assessments or provide therapeutic interventions beyond psycho-education.

Program Infrastructure

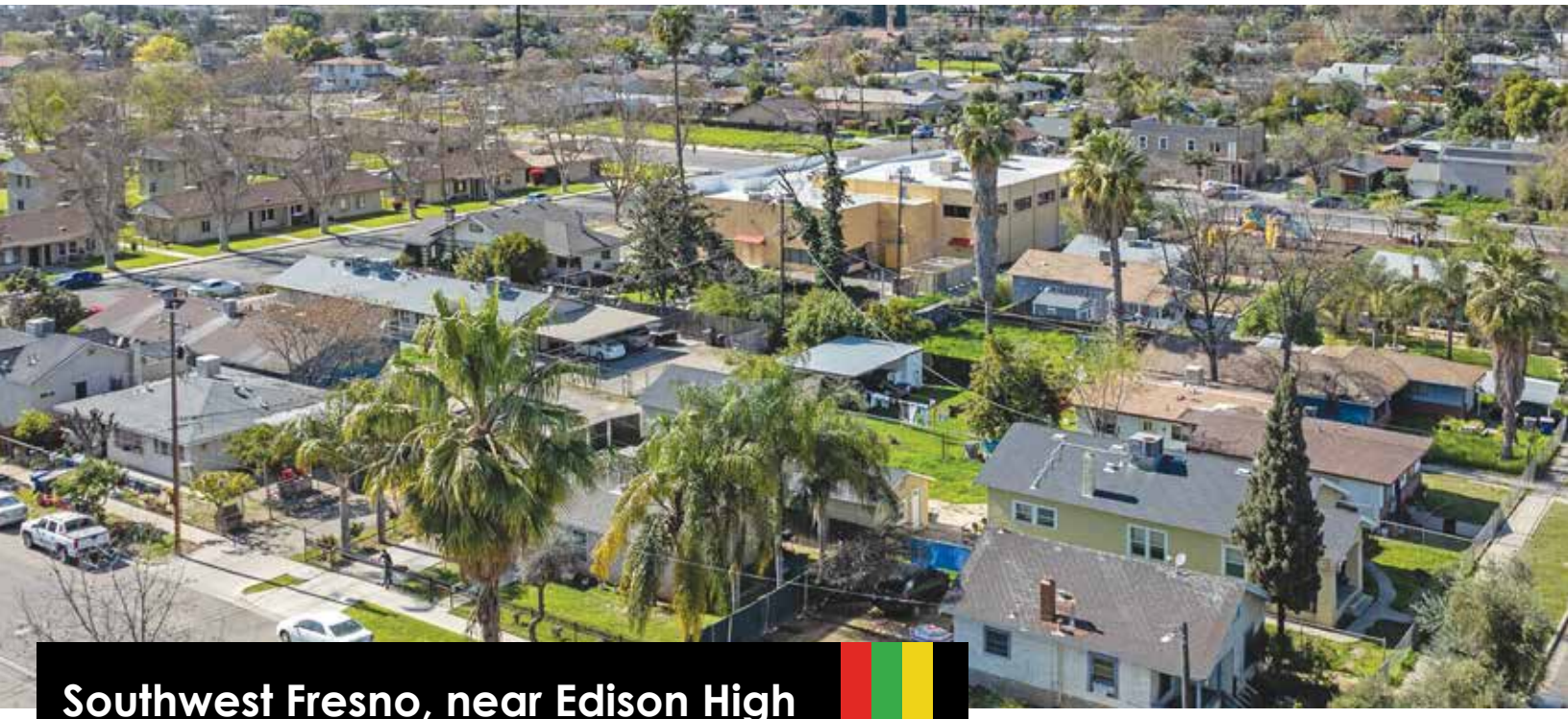
Absence of formal tracking system to document and track progress and outcomes.

Limited structured activities during summer months when youth need continued engagement.

Heavy dependence on specific staff expertise, raising sustainability and replicability concerns.

Precarious funding situation with annual uncertainty about program continuation.

Small staff team limits timely communication with both community stakeholders and program evaluators.



Southwest Fresno, near Edison High

Recommendations

Immediate Priorities

1 **Enhance Data Collection**
Develop consistent and developmentally appropriate assessment and tracking procedures that capture indicators relevant to program goals. Consider partnering with licensed mental health professionals to conduct appropriate assessments.

2 **Expand Mental Health Capacity**
Integrate licensed clinical staff or contractors who can provide therapeutic interventions while maintaining the program's community-driven, strength-based approach.

3 **Establish Alumni Tracking**
Create systematic follow-up protocols to document participant outcomes over time, including educational attainment, business ventures, and continued community engagement. This would strengthen evidence of long-term impact and enhance funding prospects.

4 **Address Activity Gaps**
Develop year-round programming to maintain youth engagement during summer months and school breaks. Parents specifically requested continued opportunities for youth to "earn and learn."

Long-Term Sustainability

5 **Pursue School District Partnerships**
The program director's efforts to integrate the Sweet Potato curriculum into local school district afternoon programs represent a promising sustainability strategy. Such partnerships must preserve the program's community-driven ethos while expanding reach.

6 **Explore Braided Funding**
Investigate opportunities to combine multiple funding streams to support enhanced staffing, particularly licensed mental health professionals and year-round activities.

Conclusion

The Sweet Potato Project successfully demonstrates that community-driven, culturally responsive programming can effectively address complex challenges facing Black youth in systemically marginalized communities. By creating "counter-spaces" where African American youth develop positive racial identity alongside practical entrepreneurial skills, the program challenges deficit narratives while building concrete pathways to economic empowerment.

The evaluation confirms that when communities are empowered to design their own interventions grounded in cultural knowledge and lived experience, remarkable transformation becomes possible.

Participants not only gained agricultural and business skills but also developed critical consciousness about their community's assets and potential for change.

While methodological limitations prevent definitive conclusions about outcomes, the overall academic improvement, high retention rates, and consistent stakeholder satisfaction provide compelling evidence of program effectiveness. Moving forward, the program might benefit from integrating structured assessment and tracking protocols, expanding access to professional mental health services, and establishing alumni tracking systems. Developing sustainable funding partnerships will further strengthen its ability to document and expand its transformative impact on West Fresno's youth and broader community.

Purpose of the Project

Through an equity lens, the Sweet Potato Project emerges as a direct response to systemic racism and its manifestations in the educational, economic, and social structures that have historically marginalized Black youth in west Fresno (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The Sweet Potato Project at the West Fresno Family Resource Center (WFFRC) is a prevention program that aims to prevent and/or reduce school drop-out, gang involvement, and substance use initiation for African American youth ages 12-15 by decreasing internalized oppression, hopelessness, and low collective efficacy. The program includes a curriculum that allows its participants to increase engagement in collective economic activity, college intentions, mentoring, and leadership development.

The project's foundational purpose recognizes that the challenges facing Black youth in West Fresno are not individual failings but rather the predictable outcomes of inequitable systems that have concentrated poverty, limited educational opportunities, and restricted access to economic mobility in the community. The principle of equity is reflected throughout the program's design. By presenting agricultural entrepreneurship and business education as valuable for the broader Central Valley economy, the project secures wide-ranging support while also addressing the needs of Black youth who have historically lacked access to agricultural ownership and entrepreneurship, even though they reside in one of the nation's most productive agricultural regions.

The Sweet Potato Project, according to its mission, recognizes the great challenges facing the young people growing up in the neighborhood, located in the southern half of Fresno's "Tale of Two Cities," where mostly Black, Latino and Asian populations reside and are more likely to live in high poverty. West Fresno is home to these communities that are disproportionately affected by poverty and limited access to resources. Residents face barriers to accessing healthy food, safe housing, quality education, and economic opportunity, leading to significant disparities in health and well-being. The Sweet Potato Project was created to help youth address these challenges through hands-on agricultural learning and entrepreneurship, fostering resilience and promoting equity in a region shaped by historic and ongoing structural inequities (Healthy Fresno County Data, 2024; West Fresno Family Resource Center, 2023; Fresno County CHNA, 2023).

About the Researchers

This evaluation of the Sweet Potato Project was conducted by Cen Cal Research, a third-party evaluation organization contracted to provide an independent assessment of the program's impact and effectiveness. The evaluation team was specifically selected to align with equity principles that emphasize the importance of researcher positionality and community knowledge in conducting culturally responsive evaluations. Dr. Robert Pimentel and Dr. Tiffany White were chosen as the lead evaluators based on their extensive experience working within West Fresno and their demonstrated commitment to strength-based approaches that center community assets rather than deficits.

Dr. Pimentel brings significant institutional knowledge and community connections through his previous role as President of the largest local community college, providing him with deep understanding of the educational landscape and systemic barriers facing students in West Fresno. Dr. White, a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist (LMFT), contributed specialized expertise through her research focused specifically on Black individuals' (rather than exclusively African American's) experiences seeking and receiving mental health services. This knowledge is directly relevant to the Sweet Potato Project's dual focus on mental health and community empowerment.

The selection of these evaluators reflects equity in the evaluation by challenging traditional methodologies that can overlook or misrepresent community voices. By choosing evaluators with deep knowledge of West Fresno and a commitment to strength-based approaches, Cen Cal Research evaluators sought to identify and address inequities in the evaluation process while emphasizing the cultural wealth and resilience within the community. This equity-focused approach aligns with the project's mission to challenge systems that have historically marginalized Black communities and other marginalized residents.

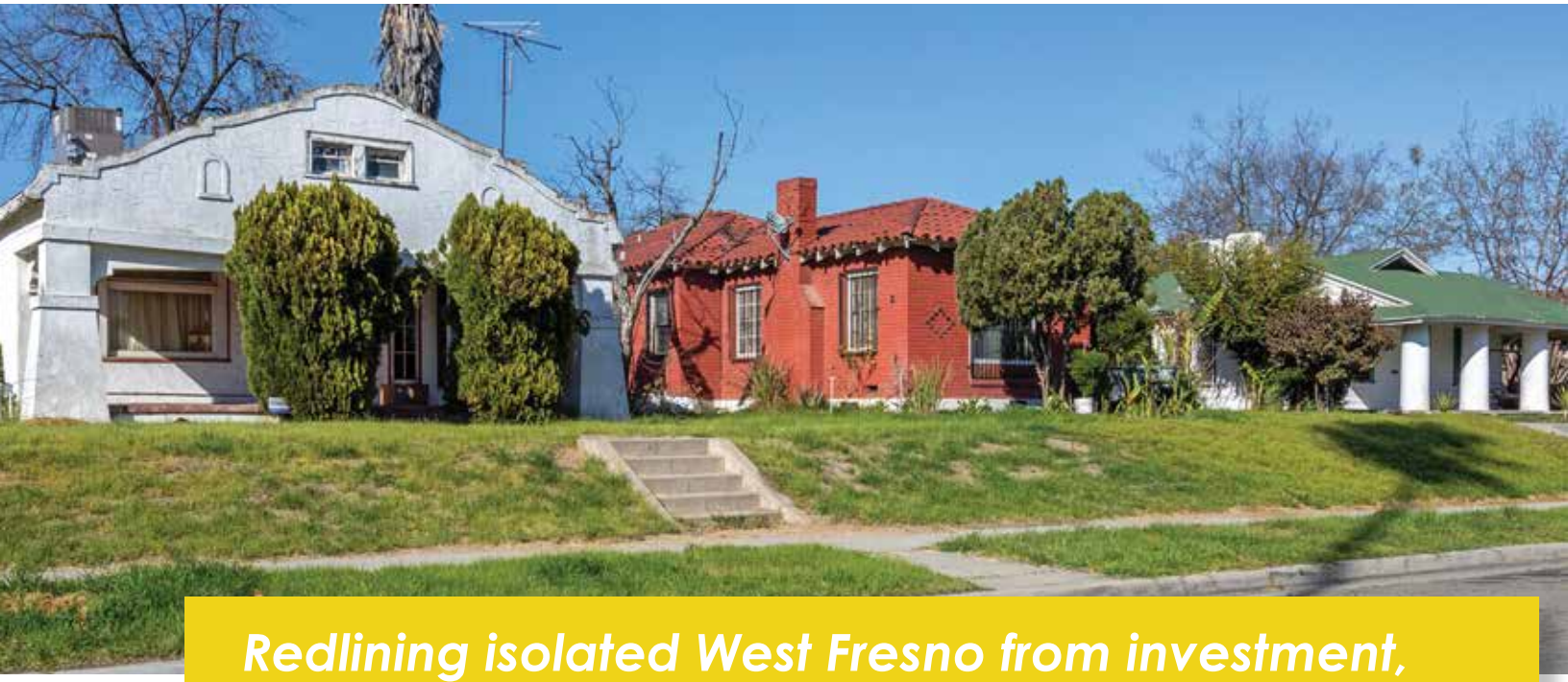
Description of the Region/Area

West Fresno exists as a geographic manifestation of what Critical Race Theory identifies as spatial racism—the systematic concentration of communities of color in areas with diminished resources, infrastructure, and opportunities (Tobias, 2020). More than half of West Fresno residents lived below poverty in 2020 (Tobias, 2020). Today the median household income in West Fresno is $34,147, about half the median income of the rest of the city and significantly lower than the state's median of $84,097 (CalMatters, 2023). Fresno's concentrated poverty rate is the highest in California, with the city ranking among the nation's most economically distressed regions (The Center Square, 2021). It is home to the city's most vulnerable residents as well as the city's dirtiest factories, poorest-performing schools, crumbling infrastructure, and accommodations with greatest livability concerns and fewer economic opportunities (Fresno Economic Opportunities Commission, 2022; Tobias, 2020). This spatial arrangement is not accidental but represents the historical legacy of institutionalized discrimination that has created what Critical Race Theory scholars' term "sacrifice zones," areas where communities of color bear disproportionate environmental and social burdens (Aguilera, 2015).

Historical Context of Redlining

The contemporary geography of West Fresno cannot be understood without examining the federal redlining practices that began in the 1930s. Through the 20th Century, the city cornered Mexican, Japanese, Armenian, and Italian immigrants and eventually Blacks into the west side of the city. Many immigrants moved north, but Black residents were denied the opportunity to live anywhere else through redlining. The practice originated in Congress in the 1930s through a program to extend low-interest, long-term loans to new homeowners. Black neighborhoods in hundreds of cities, like West Fresno, were marked red on federal maps and labeled undesirable. Government entities and private banks then denied mortgages to those residents and discouraged investment in those areas. These federal "residential safety maps" created by the Homeowners' Loan Corporation systematically classified West Fresno neighborhoods as "hazardous" and unworthy of investment, not because of objective economic factors, but explicitly because of their racial composition.

Redlining isolated West Fresno from investment, funneling Black residents and other communities of color into neighborhoods with limited resources. Over time, this segregation concentrated poverty in the area while public infrastructure, schools, and housing declined. As the city expanded, municipal planning and deed restrictions reinforced separation between communities, while highways and rail lines created barriers to economic opportunity. The effects persist, with West Fresno continuing to experience reduced life expectancy, chronic disinvestment, and fewer opportunities compared to other parts of the city.



Redlining isolated West Fresno from investment, funneling Black residents and other communities of color into neighborhoods with limited resources. Over time, this segregation concentrated poverty in the area while public infrastructure, schools, and housing declined.

Contemporary Food Apartheid

The legacy of redlining in West Fresno left many residents segregated in neighborhoods where investment and infrastructure were systematically denied. Over time, this has resulted in limited access to full-service grocery stores and healthy food choices in these communities. Today, large areas of West Fresno are classified as food deserts where residents, especially those with limited transportation, face significant challenges accessing fresh fruits and vegetables (Next City, 2022; GV Wire, 2023; KVPR, 2015).

Although "food desert" is the term commonly used to describe neighborhoods that lack access to healthy options, it does not fully acknowledge the deliberate nature of these inequities. Advocates increasingly use "food apartheid" to emphasize how urban planning, historic segregation, and systemic disinvestment have created intentional barriers to nutritious, culturally relevant food (Montalvo, 2022). Access to healthy and nutritious foods is a major social determinant of health. Limited availability of these resources in West Fresno contributes to significant disparities in health, learning, and overall well-being for program participants, making equitable food access a critical factor in their ability to thrive (Montalvo, 2022; Next City, 2022; GV Wire, 2023; The Praxis Project, 2022). Addressing these challenges is fundamental to improving health equity and resource access in West Fresno.

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Framework of the Project

The California Reducing Disparities Project (CRDP), through the California Department of Public Health, Office of Health Equity, funded the West Fresno Family Resource Center to create the Sweet Potato Project- a CRDP initiative to further develop Community Defined Evidence Practices (CDEPs) statewide. The WFFRC's Sweet Potato Project is a program that aims to assist youth ages 12-15 in many areas of growth.

The original framework set forth by the state of California is a model that uses the "unquantifiable value of the historical and cultural expertise of people of color and LGBTQ+ communities" (CA Reducing Disparities Project, 2023). The framework was designed to be community driven and use the expertise of people of color living in these communities to address health disparities through systems transformation and to secure additional resources needed to scale the work that happens within in the project.

At its core, the framework is driven by the following principles:

Community Driven	**Equity and Fairness**	**Culture of Healing**
Self-determination	**Data Sovereignty/ Governance**	**Solution Based**
Recognizing the value of "our" expertise	**Collective Approach**	**Leverage our voices on behalf of others**

Curriculum

The Sweet Potato Project developed a curriculum based on the framework established by the CRDP to help address mental and behavioral health issues among communities of color in West Fresno. The Sweet Potato Project built a program specifically designed for African American youth; however, they welcomed and served youth from any of the communities residing within the area. The curriculum consisted of the following topics:

Team Building/ What is Mental Health?	**Team Building/ What is Mental Illness?**	**Resiliency Development/ Thinking outside the box**
Understanding Mental Illness/ Self Efficacy	**Coping Skills/ You are what you think**	**Leadership Development**
Recognizing violence/ Living in a new world- social support	**Communication Skills/ When to say "I need help"- Substance Abuse & Mental Illness resources, support**	**"Peer Support/" College Readiness**

Each week, Sweet Potato Project staff gathered with local youth to deliver lessons from the curriculum, aiming to offer adaptive tools that support stability, promote wellness, and help prevent dysfunction. The project primarily serves the west side of Fresno, a historically under-resourced area rich in cultural strength and community resilience, primarily home to residents of color. Most of the participating youth are identified by the program as "at-risk" and attend local schools in the area. The term "at-risk youth" is a term used by the program in this context to describe young people who face circumstances or conditions that make them more likely to experience negative outcomes, such as academic failure, behavioral problems, involvement in the juvenile justice system, substance abuse, mental health issues, or difficulty transitioning into adulthood (Possibilities for Change, n.d.). Common risk factors include poverty, family instability, lack of parental support, poor peer relationships, abuse or trauma, and limited access to supportive resources.

For the purpose of this evaluation we will continue to use the term "at-risk youth"; however, experts and organizations increasingly recommend using more specific language that describes the particular risk or barrier (e.g., "youth at risk of academic failure due to underfunded schools") and avoiding terms that can be read as blaming or stigmatizing the individual (Spark Initiative, 2025).

The Sweet Potato Project offers hands-on learning experience in farming and small business development. Each cohort plants and cares for sweet potatoes, eventually harvesting the crop to create recipes and products for sale. The curriculum not only covers mental and behavioral health but also provides leadership training in business skills such as sales, marketing, and promotion. Youth have the chance to showcase and sell their products at community events, practice sales pitches to potential investors, and develop small business plans.

Additionally, the project provides small scholarships, organizes field trips to colleges and universities, and helps youth explore postsecondary programs that may interest them after high school.

Participant Data

The following table includes a description of the participants involved with the Sweet Potato Project with the West Fresno Family Resource Center.

Category	Mean %	N
Gender		
Male	47%	14
Female	53%	16
Race/Ethnicity		
African American	93%	28
Hispanic	7%	2
Age		
12	17%	5
13	30%	9
14	33%	10
15	20%	6

Evaluation Methods

The evaluation of the Sweet Potato Project was conducted using a mixed methods approach, designed to provide a comprehensive assessment of both program outcomes and implementation quality. This integration of quantitative and qualitative methods is widely recognized for strengthening evaluations by capturing a more complete understanding of program effectiveness and participant experience (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Quantitative data played a central role in measuring key indicators of school success and program participation, offering unbiased evidence of the initiative's reach and impact (Patton, 2015). Qualitative data were collected to evaluate the effectiveness of the curriculum and its practical application, ensuring that the program's design and delivery met the needs of participants and the broader community (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To support data-driven decision-making, researchers gathered detailed quantitative information from program staff, including participant demographics such as gender, race, and residential location, as well as engagement metrics (Salkind, 2017). Further quantitative analysis utilized records from the program database to assess direct outcomes such as changes in academic performance, grade records, and other indicators linked to participants' everyday lives. The data collected was mostly reported by the staff and collected through document reviews.

Qualitative data collection was equally rigorous. Researchers facilitated a series of focus groups with board members (community), program participants, parents, and staff. These sessions were structured to elicit in-depth feedback on program experiences, identify strengths, and uncover action-

able recommendations for improvement (Krueger & Casey, 2014). By engaging multiple stakeholder groups, the evaluation ensured that diverse perspectives informed its findings and recommendations (Patton, 2015). Individual interviews were conducted with select participants to capture nuanced personal narratives and specific suggestions for program enhancement (Seidman, 2019). The researchers used a phenomenological approach to describe the experiences of the participants from various perspectives.

The combined findings from these methods not only describe the current effectiveness of the Sweet Potato Project but also provide a roadmap for scaling the program into new communities. This evaluation framework is designed to support continuous improvement and to maximize the program's positive impact on student achievement and community well-being (Patton, 2015).

Data Limitations

As members of the community and invested in the success of the program, the researchers worked collaboratively to design data collection opportunities that would help assess and support the continued growth of the Sweet Potato Project (Patton, 2015). However, given the unique characteristics of the population served by this program, caution is warranted when attempting to generalize findings to other projects or populations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The program did not have a formal assessment in place to directly measure sensitive behaviors such as drug use, behavioral issues, gang involvement, and internalized oppression. Several factors contributed to this gap. According to staff, the sensitive nature of these topics, coupled with the absence of a licensed mental health provider on staff, made it challenging to design or administer tools that could accurately capture participants' experiences while prioritizing their safety and wellness. Ensuring participant well-being and protecting confidentiality remained the highest priority, especially given the complex realities faced by youth participants.

Instead of formal diagnostic tools, the program attempted to track progress on these issues through curriculum-based activities and observations of student participation in lessons specifically addressing these topics. While this approach offered valuable insight into student engagement and learning, it may not have fully captured the nuanced and personal experiences of youth in relation to these sensitive areas. In the future, bringing on qualified mental health professionals and involving community stakeholders in developing trauma-informed, youth-centered assessment strategies could allow for more comprehensive and responsive measurement while continuing to center youth safety and dignity.

The program evaluation employed a mixed methods approach; however, the rigor of the evaluation could not be readily scaled to measure behavioral and mental health outcomes due to the age group being assessed. Because the evaluation relied primarily on qualitative methods, the results are subject to some subjectivity and potential bias. Qualitative methods such as focus groups can be influenced by the perspectives and interpretations of both participants and evaluators, affecting the reliability and validity of evaluation outcomes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The absence of a formal assessment also created challenges in measuring the program's impact on the community. Even with quantitative surveys, it is challenging to establish a clear and direct link between changes in behavioral or mental health outcomes and program participation.

Quantitative surveys often provide measurable indicators of program impact, such as changes in grades or attendance (Patton, 2015; American Educational Research Association, 2014). Without

these, it is more challenging to demonstrate the extent or magnitude of program effects. The researchers noted that the program intentionally identified internalized oppression and low collective efficacy as key areas of focus, recognizing their impact on youth identity, motivation, and community engagement. However, these concepts are abstract and developmentally complex, making them difficult to measure accurately, particularly among younger participants.

The population of the West Fresno Family Resource Center participating in the Sweet Potato Project is unique. The program is highly regarded, largely due to the reputation of the program director and staff. One limitation is that it will be difficult to compare the results of this evaluation to other potential programs using the same curriculum. The curriculum is specifically structured for these participants and is tailored to the African American community residing on the west side of the city of Fresno. Nevertheless, the researchers believe that the program could be adapted and implemented with similar success at other sites.

Another potential limitation is the limited feedback from shy participants. Some middle school students may be less comfortable sharing their experiences in group or one-on-one qualitative settings, leading to incomplete or unrepresentative feedback (Krueger & Casey, 2014). During focus group sessions, it was evident that some participants were less engaged than others; as a result, their feedback may not be fully represented in this evaluation. However, most participants did provide feedback during the focus group sessions.

While acknowledging these limitations, it is important to recognize the value of the data collected and the unique insights gained from the perspectives of young participants. The evaluation's focus on qualitative methods and a tailored approach ensures that the voices of middle school-aged youth in West Fresno's African American community are heard and considered. These considerations inform the analysis and interpretation of the findings, providing a meaningful assessment of the Sweet Potato Project's implementation and impact within its specific context.

As we move forward, the following section presents the key findings from the evaluation. Drawing from interviews, focus groups, and program documentation, these results illuminate participants' experiences, program strengths, areas for improvement, and the

The Sweet Potato Project offers hands-on learning experience in farming and small business development.

Findings

In this section, we present both formative and summative findings related to the Sweet Potato Project. Throughout the year the researchers worked with community partners, educators, parents, participants, and staff to develop a strategy to provide ongoing feedback for the program to strengthen as they implemented the curriculum. The researchers conducted focus groups, sessions with the staff, and evaluated the Sweet Potato Curriculum throughout the year to provide feedback during the evaluation.

Formative

During the weekly sessions, the staff presented different parts of the curriculum to ensure they were meeting the overall goals of the program. Every week, the staff covered a different area of the curriculum that addressed behavioral and mental health concerns that the youth may be dealing with. Issues such as mental illness, substance abuse, coping skills, and violence are all things that are covered throughout the 10 life skills lessons through the 33 weeks of the curriculum. The curriculum also covers leadership skills, team building, business development, and college readiness as part of the curriculum.

Behavioral Interventions

The graph below demonstrates that 90% of the students completed the curriculum workshops that focused on behavior and mental health awareness.

Figure 1. Attendance

10%

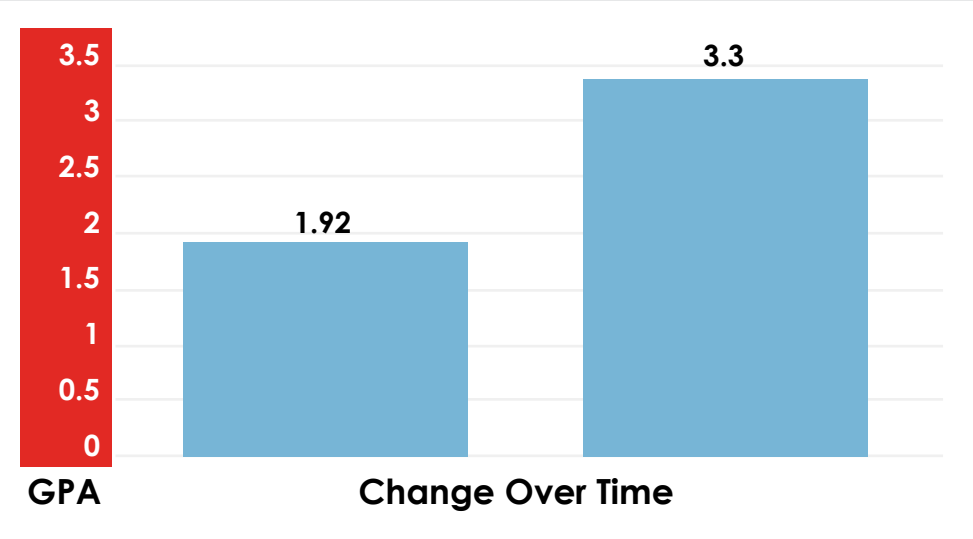
90%

This means that at least 27 of the participants attended all of the workshops and completed the lessons attached to each section.

School Success

According to the program director, the mean grade point average for the cohort of participants when they started the programs was 1.92. This data is reportedly documented at intake by program staff. By the end of the program sessions, the participants had an average of 3.3 gpa. Evidence suggests that the participants struggled with academic performance before they came to the Sweet Potato Project; however, the staff and administration believe that the support the students received through the project allowed them to perform much better by the end of the project. There was a 1.38 positive change in GPA over the year. It is difficult to prove the correlation between participation in the program and higher GPA; however, the change was documented by the program staff before and after the participants engaged in the curriculum.

Figure 2 Grade Point Average



Agricultural Education

In addition to the 10 general life skills lessons of the Sweet Potato Project curriculum, participants also attended seven agricultural activities that taught them how to grow and maintain sweet potatoes. This is the core of the project as students learn how to develop a marketing plan, and they learn how to develop a business plan. Towards the end of the program, the participants develop teams and present to a group of judges how they would sell the sweet potato recipes to the public. The event takes place at Fresno State University and includes prizes for participation and for winning. Overall, the participants have a "Shark Tank" experience where they get to sell a newly developed product and get to show off their new recipes. Unfortunately, the participants did not develop an actual business plan to demonstrate their newly acquired business skills; however, the program did not intend to have the participants develop one, as part of the overall outcomes of the program. But their presentations to the community and judges had great enthusiasm and demonstrated great marketing skills.

Mental Health

The Sweet Potato Project offers a variety of sessions on mental health including lessons on: Team Building/What is Mental Illness? / Resiliency/Self Esteem development/ Thinking outside the box and Understanding Self-Efficacy. The mental health component of the Sweet Potato curriculum lasts for 13 weeks and consumes a major part of the program curriculum.

Currently, the program staff are not qualified to conduct any mental health assessment to screen for any potential mental health disorders. There are also no mental health professionals within the staff at the West Fresno Family Resource Center that are qualified to measure feelings of hopelessness or internalized oppression. There were also no self-reported concerns with mental health from any of the participants. The current curriculum focuses on psychoeducation on mental health. The program does have trained peer support specialist that are working with the participants, but none of the staff have been certified.

The data suggests that participation in the program has increased school interest amongst the youth- since the overall GPA has increased over the year...

Summary of Formative Data

The Sweet Potato Project successfully offered relevant curriculum for the participants of the African American community who reside in West Fresno. To answer our overall research question: What impact has the sweet potato project had on the community? The Sweet Potato Project attempts to offer cultural knowledge through workshops and community activities. The data suggests that participation in the program has increased school interest amongst the youth- since the overall GPA has increased over the year, and there appears to be some additional knowledge gained from taking part in this program.

Summative

The Sweet Potato Project successfully served the African American community in one of the most underserved areas in the city of Fresno. The program has proven to have a great reputation amongst the community and appears to serve the African American Community as intended. What follows are the summative findings demonstrating the overall outcomes of the impact of the Sweet Potato Project on the community in West Fresno.

Overall Demographics

The participants from the Sweet Potato Project matched the project's description. The Sweet Potato Project is intended to serve African American you age 12-15. Primarily, the participants of the project were African American youth, and the split was almost 50/50 for gender. Figures 3 and 4 below demonstrate the demographics of the youth for this cohort.

Figure 3 demonstrates that 53% (n=16) of the participants were female, while 47% (n=14) were male.

Figure 4 demonstrates that 93% (n= 28) of the participants were African American, while 7% (n=2) were Hispanic.

Figure 3 Gender

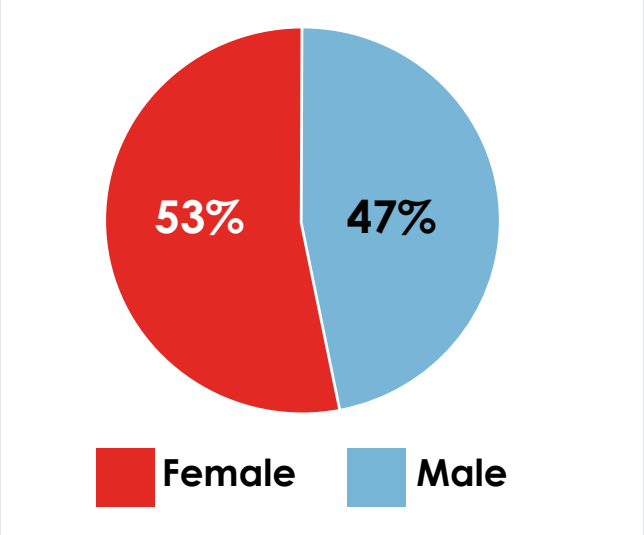
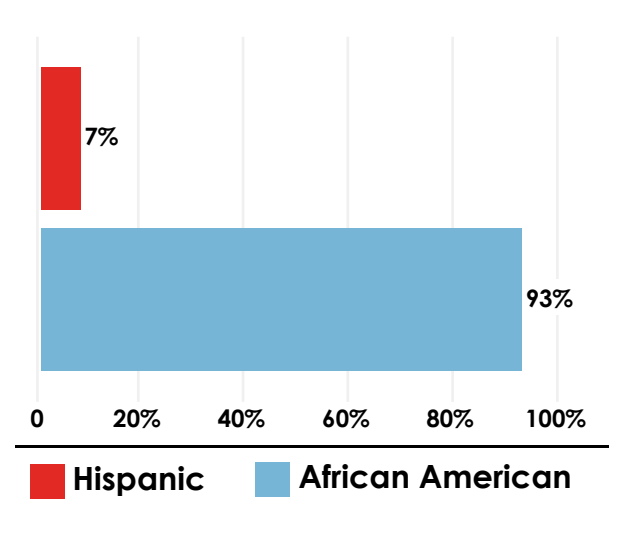


Figure 4 Ethnicity



Community Perceptions

The Sweet Potato Project has been active in the community since 2016. Since its inception, the program has aimed to reduce high school dropout rates, substance, and gang initiation amongst African American youth ages 12-15 years old. The program includes curriculum targeting some of the above-mentioned issues and curriculum around business development and agricultural skills. As a result, the program has earned a reputable reputation amongst the community and the participants it serves.

Youth Development

The researchers conducted several focus groups with participants, board of directors, parents, and staff. During the focus groups, it was evident that the community believes this program is impacting the community in a positive way. Several themes arose from the focus groups, one was a recurring theme that the Sweet Potato Project promotes youth development and growth. One of the parents stated, "My son was shy, now he talks to anyone." This common theme continued throughout the focus group with parents and the other groups.

Throughout the focus groups, there were many comments made that promoted the recurring theme of youth development. There were many comments made on the program's ability to develop leadership amongst the youth and promoting motivation amongst youth that often are not motivated to engage in activities like the ones offered through this project. The Sweet Potato Project offers a small monetary incentive that helps motivate the youth to stay engaged. This incentive appears to promote motivation amongst the youth, especially in a community where the majority of the participants come from underprivileged backgrounds.

Equity and Opportunity

The Sweet Potato Project is creative on how it promotes cultural awareness and opportunity for the youth it serves. Many of the board members stated that "Black and Brown kids don't usually get opportunities to do things like this." Meaning, Black and Brown youth from underprivileged communities do not get many opportunities to learn about entrepreneurship and financial literacy. Students in this program learn how to use money, learn about investment, capital for business ownership, marketing, and budgets. "Many adults do not have these opportunities, and we are excited to see our youth learning this at a young age in case they are interested in investing in their own businesses."

The Sweet Potato Project teaches the youth the history of Black Farming, and about the lack of representation from their communities in this economic sector. Youth are taught about pride, Black history, and are reminded of cultural norms for their communities. During the focus groups, several members of the board mentioned their excitement to see youth from these communities learning about their history and being taught how they could be change agents for their communities. Parents were proud of their youth who had opportunities to develop skills in business ownership and entrepreneurship, one parent mentioned "my son is learning public speaking to sell his recipe and it is teaching him responsibility and how to open up to the community."

Mental Health and Emotional Wellness

Parents who participated in the focus groups provided valuable insights regarding the program's mental health and wellness benefits. They described the program as an "escape from everyday life" that helped youth redirect their attention away from potentially harmful influences. Parents noted that staff successfully engaged the youth in stress-reducing activities that fostered a sense of belonging, which significantly impacted participants' overall well-being.

The program curriculum provided multiple opportunities for youth to develop emotional safety skills and build self-esteem. One parent emphasized the importance of youth learning "how to bond with one another," noting that in their community, school-related conflicts often prevent young people from forming strong peer connections. However, parents observed that program participants developed positive relationships with each other that extended beyond the program setting into their school and home environments.

Community Impact

Throughout the qualitative data collection sessions, researchers consistently heard about the significant community impact generated by the Sweet Potato Project. One of the Board Members mentioned… "The Sweet Potato Program attracts students from other places in Fresno because parents know the impact it would have on their Black child." The program creates impressive community engagement through events that showcase youth projects, encourage parental involvement, and foster broad community participation that brings residents together around a common cause.

The program's structure requires youth to develop recipes using their grown sweet potatoes and market these products to community members. This entrepreneurial component mobilizes community support in multiple ways: residents contribute marketing ideas and sales strategies, community members volunteer as mentors, and local farmers participate to highlight agricultural practices. The program successfully creates a network of support that spans different community sectors.

Overall, community members feel the program excels at uniting residents to celebrate youth achievements while drawing broader participation from those who want to support community development efforts. "It feels as the program brings the community together around some of the recipes that are developed by the kids," said one of the parents during a focus group.

Summary of Summative Findings

Overall, the evaluation confirmed most of the anticipated findings. The researchers expected that parents would strongly support the program, and this expectation was met - parents expressed satisfaction with the youth development and entrepreneurship skills their children gained through participation. The research team also anticipated positive community reception due to the program's focus on social skills and confidence-building that transfers to everyday life, and this prediction proved accurate. As expected, parents responded favorably to the curriculum's emphasis on community building and cultural heritage pride.

However, several findings surprised the researchers. The community demonstrated unexpectedly high engagement with the program, showing detailed knowledge of the intended outcomes. Additionally, all participant groups identified the program as providing a "mental health escape" that promotes overall wellness - an outcome the researchers had not anticipated. Parents expressed gratitude for staff members who extended support to their children beyond the formal program activities, showing up in other areas of participants' lives. This additional support enhanced the program's wellness-promoting effects and reinforced participants' positive feelings about themselves and their involvement.

The groups also offered recommendations for program improvement, which will be addressed in the next session.

Recommendations

The Sweet Potato Project meets many of the intended goals of the program. It brings youth from the most underserved communities in the city of Fresno and provides them with opportunities for growth and development. The curriculum used addresses behavioral problems that are persistent throughout the community, and it provides tools for the youth to be able to cope with many of the temptations that may be presented to them while attending school or being a part of their community. However, the evaluation provided data and insight to provide recommendations that would strengthen the program overall.

Data Collection

It is recommended that the program staff collect information at intake on items directly related to the desired outcomes of the program. The researchers recommend that the program incorporates a formal pre- and post-assessment process to strengthen its local evaluation framework. Assessments should be administered at intake and upon program completion to capture measurable change in key behavioral, academic, and wellness outcomes. It is suggested that the program integrate a brief, youth-appropriate survey combining adapted elements from the OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Model Survey (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention [OJJDP], 2020), the Modified National Survey of American Life (Jackson et al., 2004), and the Middle School Youth Risk Behavior Survey (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2019). This tool would help track indicators such as gang participation and related behaviors, college intentions and broader life goals, and substance use and risk behaviors over time. The survey should be designed to minimize response burden while maintaining validity and relevance for program participants. The statewide evaluation did include a formal pre and post assessment process that was not incorporated into the local evaluation process, adding something similar to the local intake process would strengthen the local evaluation moving forward.

Additionally, all participant groups identified the program as providing a "mental health escape" that promotes overall wellness - an outcome the researchers had not anticipated.

Professional Mental Health Support

Although program staff have completed CalMHSA's Medi-Cal Peer Support Specialist Certification, it would be ideal for the program to have a licensed mental health professional on staff or on contract that would help them identify behavioral concerns that could impact the youth's lives. Having a mental health professional on staff or available through WFFRC could help identify behavioral concerns and increase the likelihood that youth feel comfortable discussing sensitive topics like substance use, gang involvement, or mental health challenges. A mental health professional can observe for signs of distress that participants may not express directly due to their age, provide timely support, and promote open conversations that help reduce stigma surrounding mental health.

The researchers understand the limited funding available to be able to staff the program at the ideal levels. However, there are many opportunities for braided funding with other grant projects that could potentially fund the staff and other resources that would allow the program to have more success in areas that are needed. Opportunities to work with the local school system, along with other projects would be beneficial for all program participants, especially as it relates to mental health assessment and treatment.

Activity Gaps

During the data collection process, parents expressed concerns with the lack of activities or downtime during the summertime. Parents would like to see the program continue year-long activities that would help their youth stay engaged with the program. The parents have direct contact with the staff, and they are interested in having the program continue to offer activities that allow their youth to "earn and learn."

During the focus groups, parents and community members also had a desire to have the youth engaged in more structured activities. From their point of view, the program often lacks structure as it relates to activities to meet the program objectives. The parents would like to see structured activities that allow them to understand the outcomes of the program. These comments came from parents who mentioned having been at the sessions and noticing that the activities were not structured and needed to directly target the impacts the program seeks to have.

If the youth could share some success stories, there would be more opportunities for funders to learn about the program and hopefully fund the program for sustainability.

Alumni Tracking

During the focus groups, community members and parents expressed a desire to know what happens to the youth once they complete the program. Community members believe that the youth learn lots of business and entrepreneurial skills and they are interested in knowing more about alumni. The desire to capture this information would also help the community understand the outcomes of the program. Is the program truly changing the lives of the youth? If youth start a business, attend college, or continue to be successful as they transition to adulthood, there would be a strong correlation between the program and youth success.

Community members also believe that tracking the youth after they exit the program would allow for more opportunities for funding. If the youth could share some success stories, there would be more opportunities for funders to learn about the program and hopefully fund the program for sustainability. It would also improve marketing efforts as the program attempts to enter other sustainable markets such as the school system and other programs throughout the valley.

Involvement with Local School Districts

Funding for the Sweet Potato Project appears limited and seems at risk almost every year. While the state of California provides funding for these initiatives, renewal is often uncertain. To ensure long-term sustainability, the project should explore diverse funding opportunities. One promising avenue is partnering with local school districts to integrate the Sweet Potato curriculum into their programs, which could provide more stable and enduring support for the project's mission.

Efforts from the program director are already underway to try to make the Sweet Potato Project part of the local school district's afternoon programs. The curriculum that has been used over the years would be a great way to continue to involve local youth and keep them engaged in school. Some changes need to be made for this project to operate successfully at the local school districts, but there is an opportunity for school districts to benefit from this project being stationed at their school sites. During our conversations with community stakeholders there was a desire for this program to live at some schools but there was some controversy with keeping the same leadership and staff to ensure its sustainability. More conversations need to be had to make this a reality.

Funding for the Sweet Potato Project appears limited and seems at risk almost every year...renewal is often uncertain.

Conclusion

The evaluation of the Sweet Potato Project demonstrates that community-driven, culturally responsive programming can effectively address the complex challenges facing Black youth in systemically marginalized communities. Through its integration of agricultural entrepreneurship, mental health education, and cultural empowerment, the Sweet Potato Project has successfully created what Critical Race Theory identifies as a "counter-space" which is an environment where African American youth can develop positive racial self esteem, build practical skills, and resist the deficit narratives that too often define their educational and social experiences.

Program Impact and Effectiveness

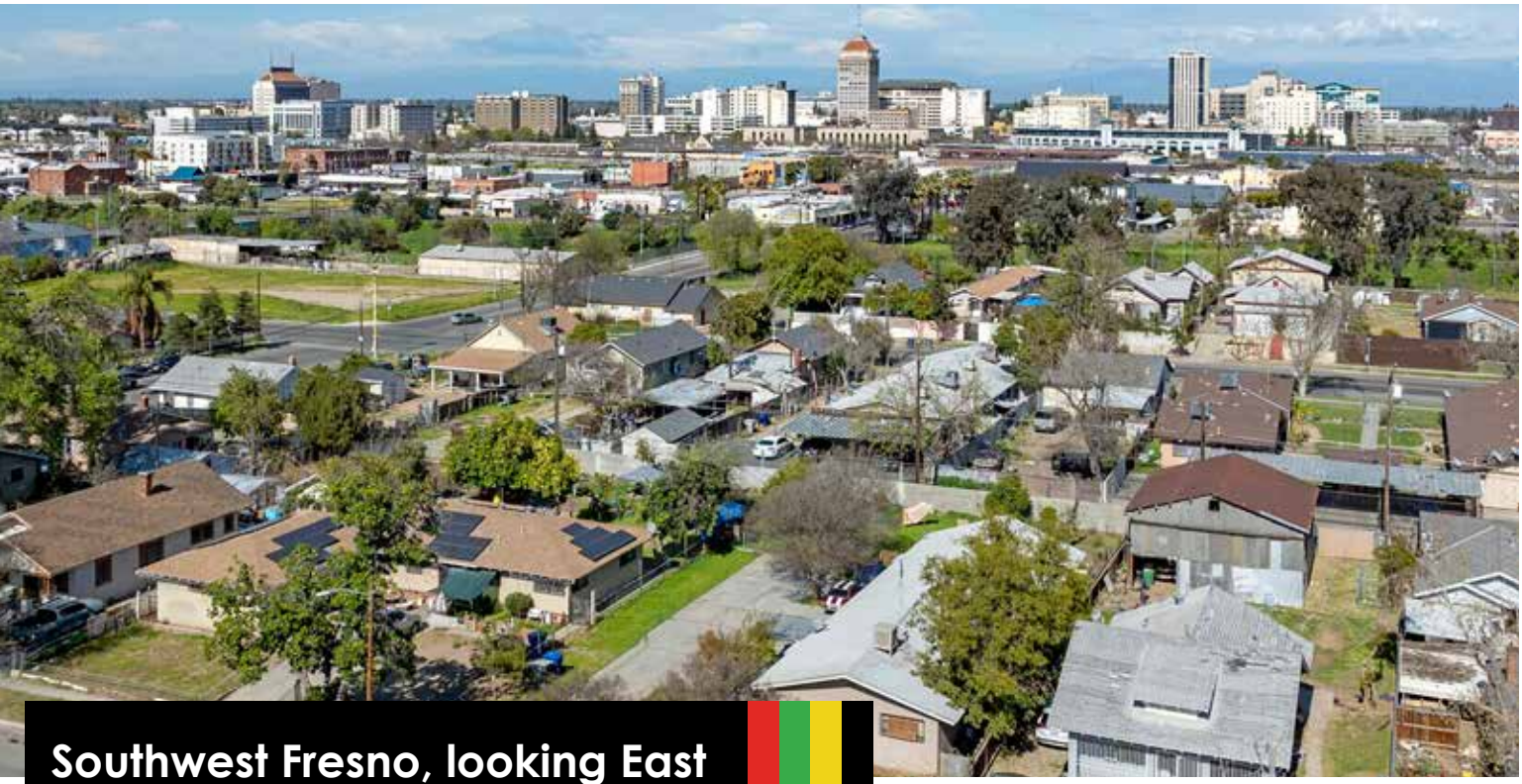
The quantitative outcomes reveal meaningful changes in participants' academic performance and engagement. The reported 1.38-point increase in GPA from 1.92 to 3.3 represents not merely statistical improvement, but a fundamental shift in participants' relationship with formal education. This academic transformation occurred alongside 90% completion rates for behavioral and mental health curriculum components, demonstrating that participants found the programming both relevant and accessible. Although the researchers cannot correlate the program impact to the change in GPA, it is a great sign that some of the intended outcomes are being achieved.

Beyond academic metrics, the qualitative findings illuminate the program's success in fostering youth development, leadership skills, and community connection. Parents consistently reported observable changes in their children's confidence, communication skills, and sense of purpose. The program's emphasis on entrepreneurship and financial literacy provided participants with concrete tools for economic empowerment while simultaneously building cultural pride through education about Black agricultural heritage.

Addressing Structural Challenges

The Sweet Potato Project's effectiveness stems largely from its recognition that individual interventions must be coupled with structural awareness and community empowerment. By situating agricultural entrepreneurship within the broader context of food apartheid and historical exclusion from agricultural ownership, the program helps participants understand their challenges as products of systemic inequity rather than personal failings. This approach builds what Paulo Freire termed (1970) "critical consciousness" which is the ability to analyze social and political conditions and take action to transform them.

The program's location within West Fresno's geography of concentrated disadvantage positions it as both a response to structural racism and a site of resistance. Participants learn not only practical skills in farming and business development but also develop understanding of their community's assets and potential for transformation. This dual focus addresses immediate needs while building long-term capacity for community change.



Southwest Fresno, looking East

Methodological Considerations and Limitations

The evaluation's mixed-methods approach provided valuable insights while acknowledging the challenges inherent in assessing programs serving young adolescents in marginalized communities. The decision to forgo traditional quantitative surveys in favor of qualitative methods reflects thoughtful consideration of the safety and wellbeing of the participants. However, this methodological choice limits the ability to demonstrate measurable changes in key outcomes such as substance use prevention, gang involvement, or mental health indicators.

The absence of licensed mental health professionals on staff represents both a limitation and an opportunity. While program staff successfully delivered psychoeducational content about mental health, they were not equipped to conduct clinical assessments or provide therapeutic interventions. Future iterations should consider integrating professional mental health services while maintaining the program's strength-based, culturally grounded approach.

Sustainability and Scaling Considerations

The evaluation reveals both the promise and the uncertainty of community-based programming in marginalized communities. The Sweet Potato Project's success depends heavily on the expertise and relationships of specific staff members, raising questions about replicability and sustainability. The program's reliance on state funding through the California Reducing Disparities Project creates ongoing uncertainty that limits long-term planning and development.

The recommendation to pursue partnerships with local school districts represents a promising avenue for sustainability while potentially expanding reach. However, such partnerships must be structured to preserve the program's community-driven ethos and Critical Race Theory foundations, which may be challenged within traditional educational bureaucracies.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The Sweet Potato Project's success offers several important lessons for policy makers, funders, and practitioners working with communities of color. First, effective programming must be grounded in community expertise and cultural knowledge rather than externally imposed interventions. The program's emphasis on recognizing and building upon community assets demonstrates the power of strength-based approaches that honor the historical and cultural wisdom of marginalized communities.

Second, addressing individual challenges requires attention to structural conditions. Programs that help participants understand the systemic nature of their challenges while building concrete skills for transformation offer more sustainable pathways to change than those focused solely on individual behavior modification.

Third, authentic community engagement creates multiplier effects that extend far beyond individual participants. The Sweet Potato Project's success in mobilizing community support, engaging parents, and creating intergenerational connections demonstrates how well-designed programming can strengthen social cohesion and collective efficacy.

Future Directions

Moving forward, the Sweet Potato Project should prioritize the integration of professional mental health services while maintaining its community-driven approach. The addition of licensed clinicians (ideally from the community) who share the program's theoretical framework and cultural values could enhance the program's ability to address trauma and mental health challenges without compromising its strengths.

Alumni tracking emerges as both a practical necessity for demonstrating long-term impact and a theoretical imperative for understanding how critical consciousness develops over time (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Following participants into adulthood would provide valuable insights into the lasting effects of culturally responsive programming and could strengthen the evidence base for similar interventions.

The program should also explore opportunities to influence policy and practice beyond its immediate service area. The curriculum and approach developed through the Sweet Potato Project represents a valuable model that could inform broader efforts to transform educational and mental health services for communities of color.

Final Reflections

The Sweet Potato Project evaluation ultimately demonstrates that when communities are empowered to define their own solutions, design their own interventions, and lead their own transformation efforts, remarkable changes become possible. The program's success challenges dominant narratives about Black youth, marginalized communities, and the effectiveness of community-based interventions.

In West Fresno, where decades of disinvestment have concentrated poverty and limited opportunities, the Sweet Potato Project offers proof that another way is possible. Through the simple act of growing sweet potatoes, young people are learning to see themselves as entrepreneurs, leaders, and change agents. They are developing practical skills and the critical consciousness necessary to transform the conditions that constrain their communities.

The evaluation findings suggest that the Sweet Potato Project has succeeded in its fundamental mission: creating opportunities for African American youth to develop positive racial identity, build economic skills, and resist the forces of oppression that continue to shape their daily lives. As the program moves forward, its challenge will be maintaining this transformative vision while building the institutional support necessary for long-term sustainability and growth.

The Sweet Potato Project evaluation ultimately demonstrates that when communities are empowered to define their own solutions... remarkable changes become possible.

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Appendix

Curriculum

Dates/ Weeks	Module Topic	Activities (3-4)	PEI Target(s): (Example, reducing mental illness, etc.) Refer to your logic model.
WEEKS 1-3	Introduction/Expectation/Getting to know youth.	Pictionary peopleTwo truths and one lie	Building protective factors for mental illness
WEEKS 4-8	Team Building/What is Mental Illness?	The Escape Room Challenge:The water towers	Building protective factors for mental illness
WEEKS 9-13	Resiliency/Self Esteem development/ Thinking outside the box.	Self-esteem writing: Prompt Self-esteem Bingo Self-esteem packet	Building protective factors for mental illness
WEEKS 14-17	Understanding Self-Efficacy	Class discussion on African Americans and Mental Illness Self-Efficacy Checkup	Self-Efficacy
WEEKS 18-22	Communication Skills "When to say I need help"- Substance Abuse and Mental Illness resources and support.	Communicating Mental Health issues Mental Illness assessment Business and Marketing activities	Improve mental Illness. Promote recovery from substance abuse and mental illness.
WEEKS 23-28	Leadership Development "Peer Support"- College readiness	College readiness Activity Creating your own business Changing negative habits	Improve high school graduation rates Building protective factors for mental illness

WEEKS 28-30	Coping skills/You are what you think	I believe assessment The mirror of me Black Wall Street	Building protective factors for mental Illness Improve high school graduation rates.
WEEKS 30 - 33	Recognizing violence/ Living in a new world- Social Support.	A flower that grew out of concrete The Big Dogg Gang and Violence Prevention Lesson Plan, By Kimi Lent	Building protective factors for mental Illness Improve high school graduation rates.
WEEKS 34-36	Conclusion-planning end of year celebration	Presentations and Certificates of completion	Improve mental Illness Building protective factors for mental illness Improve high school graduation rates. Promote recovery from substance abuse and mental illness.

Sweet Potato Project Assesment Form

This survey integrates modified versions of the OJJDP Gang Model Survey, the Modified National Survey of American Life, and the Middle School Youth Risk Behavior Survey. The goal is to measure gang participation and related behaviors, college intentions and broader life goals, and track substance abuse and risk behaviors. Questions are minimized for efficiency while maintaining relevance.

* Indicates required question

Survey Purpose
Thank you for taking the time to participate in this survey. The purpose of this survey is to help us understand how effective our program is in supporting students like you. Your honest answers will help us improve the program and make it more helpful for everyone.

This survey is not meant to judge you or your choices. There are no right or wrong answers and your responses will remain private. We simply want to learn more about your experiences, goals, and challenges so we can better support you and others in achieving success.

Thank you for sharing your thoughts! Your voice matters, and your feedback will make a difference.

Pre/Post
We need to know who you are so we can compare when we do this again when you graduate from the program!

1. What is your assigned number? *

(Short Answer)

Gang Participation and Related Behaviors (Modified OJDDP Gang Model Survey part 1)

2. Do you know anyone who is part of a gang? * Mark only one oval.

Yes

No Skip to question 5

3. Have you ever been approached to join a gang? * Mark only one oval.

Yes

No Skip to question 5

Gang Participation and Related Behaviors (Modified OJDDP Gang Model Survey part 2)

4. Why do you think gangs are appealing to youth? *

Skip to question 8

Gang Participation and Related Behaviors (Modified OJDDP Gang Model Survey part 3)

5. How safe do you feel in your neighborhood or school? * Mark only one oval.

Very Safe

Somewhat Safe

Not Safe

6. What activities do gangs in your community typically engage in? *

(Long answer text)

7. Why do you think some youth leave gangs? *

(Long answer text)

College Intentions and Broader Life Goals (Modified National Survey of American Life)

8. When you grow up, what would you like to be?

(Long answer text)

9. Do you plan to attend college after high school?

(Long answer text)

10. What are your personal goals for this school year?

(Long answer text)

11. If you could achieve one major life goal, what would it be?

(Long answer text)

12. Who inspires you the most in your life, and why?

(Long answer text)

13. Have you ever tried alcohol, tobacco, or drugs?

Yes

No (If no, skip to question 15)

Substance Abuse and Risk Behaviors (Modified Middle School Youth Risk Behavior Survey part 1)

14. How often do you use these substances?

Rarely

Occasionally

Frequently

15. Do you know friends or classmates who use alcohol or drugs?

Yes

No

16. Have you ever felt pressured by others to try alcohol or drugs?

Yes

No

17. What activities do you enjoy that help you stay away from risky behaviors?

(Long answer text)

18. How often do you talk to an adult about your feelings or challenges?

Often

Sometimes

Rarely

Never

West Fresno family resource center

Empowering the Community

A member of HUD designated EnVision CENTERS