

**Eyes On Your Mission Academy:  
Building Digital Capacity And Engagement  
And Advancing Social Justice For 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning**



A White Paper Prepared for the Ware Foundation

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** This white paper presents the findings and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data collected during Eyes on Your Mission (EOYM), two six-week digital media academies focused on teaching underserved high school students digital media production while working with filmmaking professionals and college students to create video mission statements for social justice organizations in South Florida. The academies took place in the summer and spring of 2017-2018 and were funded with a \$100,000 grant from the Ware Foundation. Data collected from pre- and post-academy surveys, as well as focus groups, one-on-one interviews and participant observation, show that the academies achieved a high level of success in increasing students exposure to and proficiency with digital media, as well as a desire to further pursue careers and initiatives in digital media production, particularly those focused on issues of social justice and community engagement. Students were mostly positive about the experience of co-curricular mentoring and teaching, and found true value in participating in a project that moved them outside their boundaries of familiarity and comfort. At the same time, the data also point to areas in which the EOYM academies could be improved, especially in the areas of classroom management, communication and organization, as well as providing more opportunities for mentoring and collaboration between the high school and college students. Overall, the white paper underscores the true value of initiatives like EOYM for the participants, particular in the fractured and often isolating urban environments that can be found in South Florida. The research concludes by first recognizing the areas in which these academies were successful in reaching their stated goals, and then making suggestions for how this effort and others like it can be even more successful in the future.

## **Introduction**

During the summer and spring of the 2017-2018 academic school year, college students from Florida International University's Department of Journalism & Media joined together with high school students from Miami Northwestern Senior High School (both schools are located in Miami) for the Eyes on Your Mission Academy (EOYM). These six-week digital media academies focused on teaching underserved students digital media production while working with filmmaking professionals and college students to create video mission statements for social justice organizations in South Florida. A total of 34 college students and 24 high school students participated during the course of two academies, which focused on the technological aspects of planning and producing media content, but also held workshops on career building skills and choices, and social media messaging and outreach. During the academies, students also engaged in discussions of the power of media to both represent and misrepresent the communities around us, our potential to craft new narratives that might counteract the most harmful of these representations, as well as the role that a focus on social justice and equality might play in the stories we choose to tell and how we tell them.

Both EOYM academies were funded with a \$100,000 grant from the Ware Foundation. As a part of the grant guidelines, the project's Principal Investigator from FIU, Dr. Moses Shumow, gathered both quantitative data (surveys) and qualitative data (focus groups, interviews, and participant observation) in order answer the following research questions and provide analysis and guidance for future efforts:

- In what aspects was the EOYM academy effective in its goals of engaging students in digital media production focused on social justice?
- In what aspects did the EOYM academy fall short of these goals?
- What are the best (and worst) practices for building co-curricular digital media academies built on critical inquiry and social justice?
- What are students' perceptions of their relationship to digital media?

- Within those perceptions, are their possibilities for engaging voice and agency within Miami's complex urban environment?
- How can the data gathered be leveraged most effectively for future EOYM academies?

### **Background research**

There is an extensive body of previous research exploring the possibilities for engaging young people with civic oriented media that stresses the engaged and participatory nature of collaborative production (Couldry, 2010; Dahya, 2017; Dussel & Dahya, 2017; Jenkins, et. al, 2009). The present research builds on this foundation as it seeks to better understand the intricate processes that take place when students from different backgrounds and stages of life experience are challenged to produce media that emphasizes collaborative inquiry and engaging in issues and subjects often ignored in mainstream narratives. In the case of the EOYM academies, this meant an initial discussion with participants about the power of media to both shape our understanding of the world around us, the ways in which media have shaped our prior understandings of both our own communities and those with which we are less familiar, but also how we might harness those narratives towards our own purposes of engaged learning and social justice.

At the same time, the complexity of Miami as an urban space, with its historically embedded segregation among different communities, the influence of different waves of migration that have reshaped the social geography of South Florida at different times in its history, and the current levels of increasing inequality and unaffordability for many of its residents, challenged academy participants to interrogate their own understandings of the city and communities they call home. These cultural, geographic, and educational frameworks for dialogue and media analysis and production also emerge out of a larger body of academic inquiry (Harvey, 2007; Giroux, 2005, 2007). This context creates an essential background for understanding the experiences of students during the academy. As Dussel and Dahya (2017) have noted, "...sociocultural norms, discursive frameworks, technological tools, and other forms of power

and privilege influence the process of digital media production for young people, and play a central role in configuring how young people produce media” (p. 4).

The combination of participatory, engaged, and critical media production with a complex urban environment set the framework for the results of the research that was conducted with participants of the EOYM academies. These factors play an important role in the following analysis and presentation of research results, as they help us gain a deeper understanding of both the areas in which, based on the results of the data that was gathered during the academies, the collaboration was successful in its goals, but also for gaining insights into where the academies perhaps fell short of their desired results. It is hoped that this process of self-reflection in turn will help future EOYM academies to be more successful. Perhaps more importantly, this research will also give some guidance and inspiration to future groups of educators, researchers, and media practitioners hoping to engage in similar work. As the digital age progresses apace, and the role and influence of media continues to play an ever more important role in the lives of young people, academies like EOYM, which focus on reaching underserved youth and harnessing digital media in a process of critical engagement, will take on an increasingly important role in the educational experiences of students (Herr-Stephenson, 2009).

## **Methods**

The data gathered from the EOYM academies of the summer of 2017 and spring of 2018 were both quantitative and qualitative. During the first day of the academy, students were asked to fill out a pre-academy survey, created using Google forms and designed to gain an initial understanding of students’ prior experiences with digital media, working with non-profits, and expectations for the academy (the survey can be found [here](#)). At the end of the academy, participants were asked to fill out a post-academy survey (the survey can be found [here](#)). The goal of this survey was to measure what students had learned during their time in the academy, the highlights of their experience, and whether or not EOYM had increased their desire to both engage in digital media production as well as work with non-profits focused on social justice.

During the course of both academies, qualitative data was gathered through the use of focus groups, one on one interviews, and participant observations. There were two focus groups carried out during each academy, each of which involved between 8-10 participants, a mix of both high school and college students, each lasting between 45 minutes and one hour. In addition, when time in the schedule allowed, one on one interviews were conducted with both high school and college students. In total, ten interviews of this nature were conducted. In all instances of dialogue, whether in a group setting or individually, and working under the aegis of a study approval from the Institutional Review Board at FIU, students were reminded that the conversations were being recorded for analysis, all comments would remain anonymous, their participation would have no bearing on their overall performance in the academy, and that they should share as openly and honestly as they felt comfortable. Participant observation was also employed throughout the academies by a trained research assistant, in order gather additional data that would help researchers to better understand the day-to-day functioning of the academies.

All of the focus groups and interviews were recording using a digital audio recorder and were then transcribed for analysis. Researchers employed a grounded theory approach for analyzing the data, in which transcripts were read, re-read and coded for emerging themes related to the research questions guiding the analysis.

### **Pre and Post Academy Survey Results**

***Pre-academy survey.*** The pre-survey results showed clearly that, prior to the academy, digital media already played a major role in the day-to-day lives of the academy participants (Figure 1). Nearly three-quarters of the respondents responded that they were “very familiar” with digital media production (Figure 2), while almost 90% had produced digital media content previously (Figure 3). However, when it came to past experience working on community engagement or

social justice initiative, the level of experience was much lower, with only 20% of the participants responding affirmatively (Figure 4).

### How important is digital media (internet use, digital videos, social media) in your day to day life?

59 responses

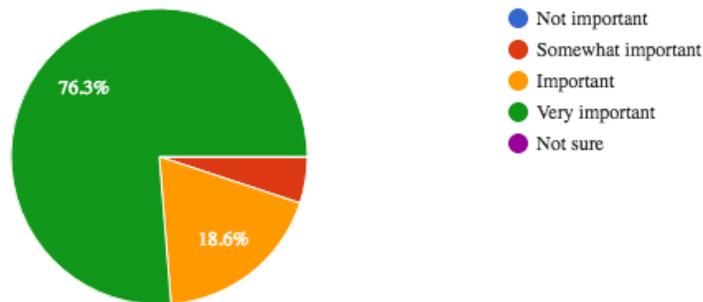


Figure 1. Importance of digital media in day to day life

### What is your familiarity with Digital Media production?

59 responses

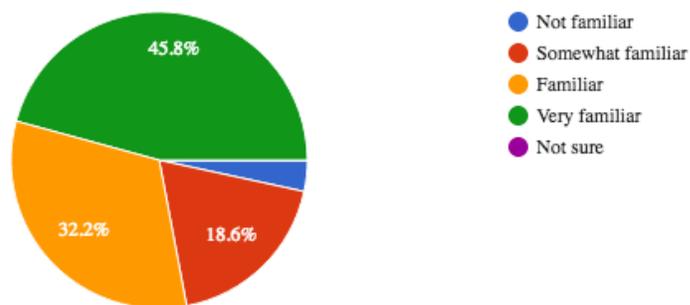


Figure 2. Familiarity with Digital Media production

Have you ever produced any digital media content (music, videos, blogs, etc.)

59 responses

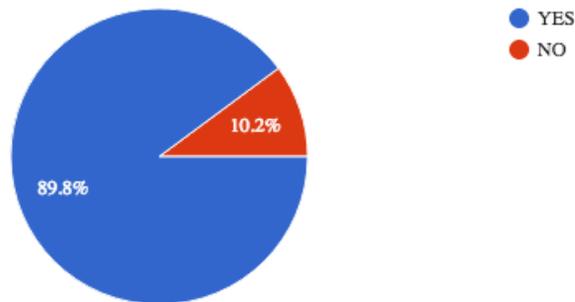


Figure 3. Produced digital media content in the past

Prior to this academy, have you ever worked on any community engagement or social justice initiative?

59 responses

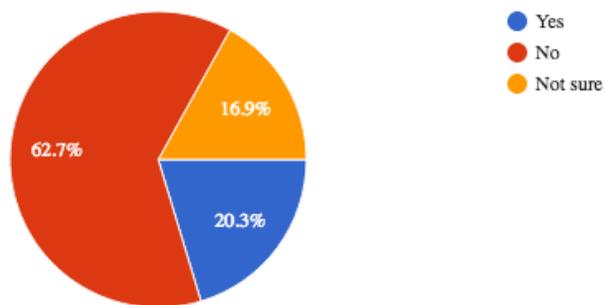


Figure 4. Prior experience with community engagement or social justice initiatives

**Pre-academy survey short answers.** The pre-academy survey also included several questions that allowed for short written answers, the results of which are worth summarizing briefly, as they add some textual results to the data gathered from the more structured questions already presented above. For instance, students were asked to share some examples of the kinds of digital media they had produced in the past. Responses included blogging, music production,

video and audio content for personal and professional websites as well as class projects, web design, and creating content shared on social media sites like YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram. If they had answered affirmatively to the question about prior experience with community engagement or social justice initiatives, students were also asked to provide examples. While far fewer participants claimed to have any such experience, the examples that were shared by those who did included social work done in high school, mission trips focused on poverty and homelessness, gang intervention, and work with different philanthropic organizations through a sorority at Florida International University.

Additionally, the final question of the pre-survey asked students to list four outcomes that they expected to gain from their experience in the Eyes on Your Mission Academy. A synopsis of these responses is helpful, as they give some sense of what students hoped for during their time in the EOYM academies. A common response from participants to this question is that they were looking for “experience” and the ability to gather “material for a portfolio,” “connections,” or “professional development,” all of which clearly indicate an overall desire to leverage their time in the academy towards a future academic or professional career. They also expressed a desire for “teamwork” and “engagement with the community,” as well as the possibilities for both mentoring and being mentored, helping with non-profits, and at a more technical level, gaining the skills and knowledge for producing higher quality digital media content. These included instruction on using a camera, editing video, and creating “professional communications.”

**Post-academy survey.** From a purely objective point-of-view, based on participants’ responses to the survey, the EOYM academies were successful in most of their goals. More than half of the respondents reported that their knowledge in digital media and film making had increased “very much,” while another 30% reported that their knowledge had increased “somewhat” (Figure 5). More than 95% of participants saw themselves producing another film or video for social change (Figure 6), and almost 98% imagined using media to help another non-profit in the future (Figure 7).

In terms of future goals and aspiration, nearly 80% of respondents said they planned to continue studying digital media or filmmaking in college or graduate school (Figure 8). And while self-selection for the Academy, prior experience and personal or professional goals may have played a role in the next result, over 90% of the participants expressed a desire to pursue a career in digital media or film making in the future (Figure 9).

### Over the past month, how has your knowledge in digital media and film making increased:

43 responses

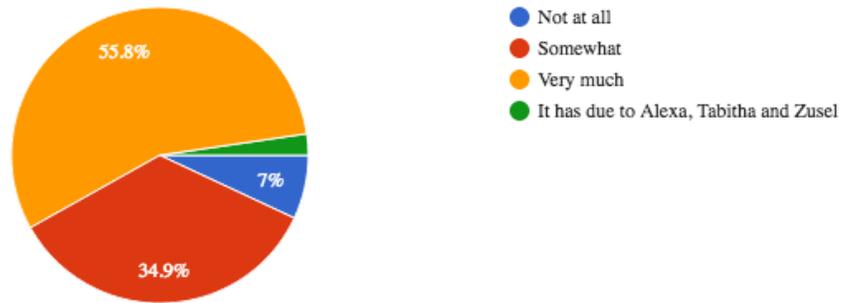


Figure 5. Increase in digital media and film making over the past month

### Do you see yourself producing another film/video for social change?

43 responses

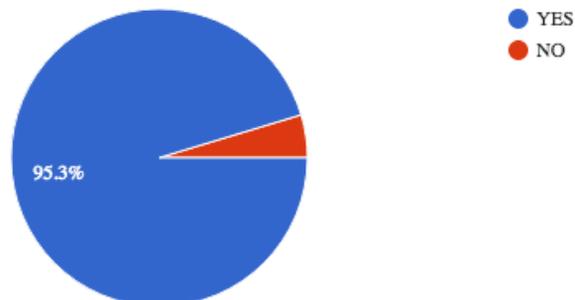


Figure 6. Producing another film or video for social change

### Can you imagine using media to help another nonprofit in the future?

43 responses

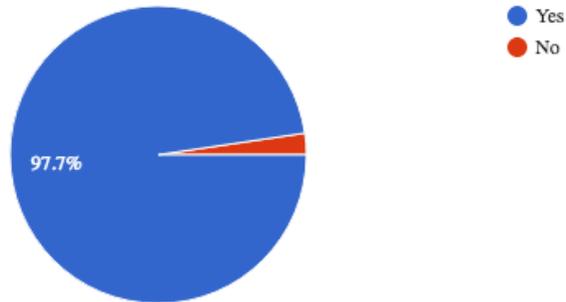


Figure 7. Using media to help a non-profit in the future

### Do you plan to continue studying digital media or film making in college or graduate school?

43 responses

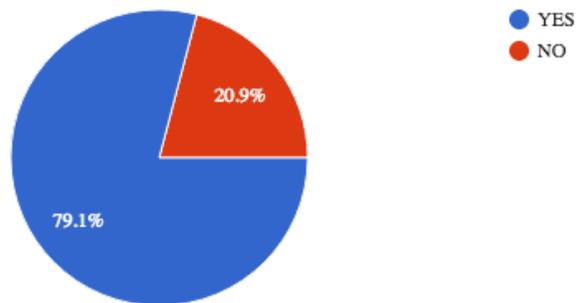


Figure 8. Plan to continue studying digital media or film making in college or graduate school

## Do you see yourself having a career in digital media or film making in the future?

43 responses

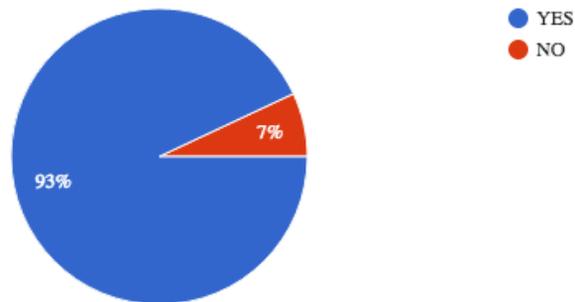


Figure 9. Future career in digital media or film making

**Post-academy survey short answers.** Students were asked to provide short responses to the three post-academy survey questions. While the summary provided below is not comprehensive, there were certain themes that emerged from the short answers that were provided by participants. These themes are worth exploring briefly here, as they provide more contextual depth than the itemized questions above. More importantly, some of the places in which the Eyes on Your Mission academies fell short of their goals start to emerge within these short responses, and will increase in significance in the analysis of the qualitative data from the focus groups and interviews that will follow. These insights, while perhaps not the ideal outcomes that might have been hoped for by sponsors and organizers, are actually in many ways more helpful as we consider the potential for greater success during future academies.

The first short answer question asked participants to list three important skills they learned as a participant at the EOYM. In this case, many of these responses focused on technology, a logical outcome given the digital media emphasis of the academy: drone piloting; shooting with a digital SLR camera; storyboarding; gathering high quality audio; and how to set up effective lighting were among the skills listed. Other students focused more on the intangible components of the Academy. "Patience" was a common term, most likely a reflection of the

complicated nature of the Academy and all of the different components needed to make it work. Different forms of the ideas of “Teamwork,” “Communication,” “Time Management,” and “Versatility” were all repeated in this question from different respondents. Again, it is important to note that while students were clearly learning a lot during their time in EOYM, they were also responding to and reflecting upon the complexity of making a co-curricular initiative come to life and hold meaning for all involved.

The second short response question asked participants to describe their experience of being a mentor or being mentored in the Academy. Here we start to see that while the ideas and motivations for bringing together high school and college students from diverse backgrounds and asking them to learn from one another and engage in a media production effort are commendable and come from a place of sincere desire for equity in education and creating new and important experiences for students, the realities of what that will look like in the field and classroom are often much more complicated. Many of the responses to this question were overwhelmingly positive. Below are a few examples of answers reflecting on the positive experience of both mentoring and being mentored:

- “I learned from mentees, and was able to help share with mentees that college isn't that scary. It's a great experience.”
- “In my experience I learned a lot about my mentors and they have helped me learn about my passion and my future career.”
- “I liked being able to teach the apprentices what we learned throughout our college career. Watching them use the cameras and worry about making sure the sound was good and the focus was good was a great learning experience for them.”
- “My experience being mentored was awesome. I love it. My team mates were all great and always there for me when I needed help.”

However, the responses from other students told a more nuanced story about the process of either mentoring or being mentored:

- “Lack of chemistry.”
- “It was very challenging, because none of the high school students were motivated.”
- “My mentors were mostly helpful. They sort of took over everything, but one of them would sometimes check in on us and make sure we understood what they were doing. Over all, it was a good experience.”
- “It was great to get to know a student from somewhere I usually would not have. She was sweet but at the end of the day I realized i had to be a little more demanding of her.”
- “I enjoyed my experience, I just felt a bit limited. I wish I could have done more with it. It felt good to work with an MNW [high school] student and teach them the ropes. I really enjoyed it, I just feel like there are things that can be done to get it to its full potential.”

While neither group of responses tells the entire story about what it meant to either mentor or be mentored during EOYM, the differences in these responses is telling, and does offer some insights into the challenges future academies might face in bringing together high school and college students, as well as what they might do to overcome them (suggestions will be made in the conclusion).

The final short answer question on the post-academy survey asked participants to list three things that they would recommend be done differently in order to make Eyes on Your Mission academies more effective. As with the question outlined above, there was some divergence in these responses that is worth mentioning as well as providing some representative answers that show the spectrum of participants suggestions for improvement (which in some ways can be seen as areas in which they felt that their experience had fallen short of expectations). There was clearly some frustration with the way in which communication among academy organizers, and especially with the non-profits, was handled. A few responses related to this concern included the following:

- “More communication, organization, and clarity from the EOYM staff.”
- “Be more organized, communicate better, create more of a helpful environment.”

- “Seeing the non-profits team struggle, the non-profits should be ready to start working as soon as academy starts. Having everyone including experts be at every class.”
- “Better organization, choose non-profits before semester begins.”
- “Have expectations set early, and information required for teams prepared prior to course starting, allow more time to complete assignments and have contact with nonprofits prior to class.”

Some students also expressed concerns about the ways in which they were being taught, the form and format of instruction and instructional materials, and how this dynamic was impacting their experiences interacting with one another:

- “For the apprentices to have more involvement with the camera like have the mentors walk us through it.”
- “More time spent on creating a story prior to meeting with the kids - we can guide them. More time spent on editing instead of watching videos. More activities that involve actual equipment use and not talking about it.”
- “more intimate time w [sic] the apprentice.”
- “Be more organized. Cancel ALL the lectures. And have us teach the apprentices. We are seniors. We don't need a two hour lecture on b roll.”
- “Better communication between the people in charge and the students, clearer directions from the beginning of the program and more time to complete the tasks at hand.”

Finally, quite a few students were critical in their view of the Academy leadership and this criticism was expressed in several of the short answers provided to this question, as well as in discussions that took place during focus groups. Transcribing the specific comments word for word here are probably not helpful, as anyone who has spent time in a classroom knows that certain interactions can take on a life of their own and become exaggerated over time in terms of the actual impact on the teaching and learning that takes place. However, the primary concern seemed to be an internal conflict/argument between academy organizers over compensation and responsibilities which was overheard by several students and then repeated and reflected upon as frustrations with other elements of the academy built over time. This

outcome deserves closer attention in terms of developing a leadership culture and the planning that will take place for future academies and will be discussed further in the analysis and conclusion.

### **Focus group, interviews, and participant observation results**

In many ways, the results of the qualitative data gathered reflect much of the data already provided by the pre and post academy surveys. Thus, for the sake of brevity and to avoid repetition of analysis, three of the more subtle and in many ways more intangible findings from the qualitative data are presented here. The hope is that these themes will add more texture and context to what has already been outlined above and perhaps provide deeper insight into the experiences, both positive and negative, that the students had during their time in the academy. In order to analyze the data, transcripts and participant observation notes, researchers used a grounded theory approach, in which the data is read and re-read for emerging similarities, which are then coded into themes and analyzed within the broader theoretical and pedagogical frameworks driving the academy and the goals and aspirations of Eyes on Your Mission's organizers and sponsors.

***New experiences in unfamiliar environments.*** In bringing together students from diverse socio-economic, cultural, educational and geographic background, one of the goals of Eyes on Your Mission is to create new learning experiences that require participants step outside of their zones of familiarity and comfort, and in the process, find opportunities for greater empathy, understanding, and deep collaboration around digital media production. Many of the responses during the interviews and focus groups, as well as interactions noted during participant observations, spoke to this outcome. A brief but revealing comment related to this theme came from one of the apprentices:

“It's like you pretend you're a college student, with your Starbucks coffee.”

On its face, this comment is innocuous, and could be read simply as a high school student having a good time in an after school program on a college campus. However, the subtext to this comment is revealing. The mentees in this program were all recruited from a large high school in Liberty City, a Miami neighborhood in which, according to the 2008-2015 American Community Survey (U.S. Census), more than 60% of the population has less than a high school diploma, less than 8% have college experience of any kind, and only four point five percent have achieved a bachelor's degree. The numbers are even lower for graduate education. Most research on the subject has shown that young people whose parents went to college are much more likely to both pursue higher education and be successful doing so.<sup>1</sup> Thus, this idea of "pretending" to be a college students actually carries a much weightier connotation for this cohort than it might for students from a different community or high school, and should not be dismissed lightly.

The second part of this comment is also revealing, and speaks to the larger social and cultural characteristics that define Miami. Liberty City is a mostly low-income, minority majority community, with more than 75% of the population identifying as Black/African American. The median per capita income of \$14,000 is well below the county and statewide levels (\$29,000 and \$32,000 respectively), and the poverty rate is nearly 45%, compared to 20% for the county and 16% for the state. These demographics are reflected in the services and businesses that residents of Liberty City find in their community, which tend to be defined by corner stores and fast food chains, not shopping plazas and grocery store chains. And there are almost certainly few expectations for Starbucks; a quick Google search reveals no outlets of this icon of gentrification within a mile or more of the traditional borders of Liberty City. And yet, on the campus of Florida International University where Eyes on Your Mission academies took place, just a few miles from Liberty City, there is a Starbucks inside the library. In this case, the phrase "...with your Starbucks coffee" is more than just an afternoon shot of caffeine, but instead speaks to the experience of that student and his/her expectations for what it means to be in

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/02/08/students-postsecondary-education-arcs-affected-parents-college-backgrounds-study>).

college, and even perhaps what it could mean for them in the future, when they, too, might have quick and ready access to a Starbucks.

Comments from the college participants made during focus groups and interviews revealed similar experiences related to what it meant for them to engage with students from a community, school, and background with which they were wholly unfamiliar. As one student related, “That [visiting the Liberty City high school the first day of the academy] was really eye opening for me. I'm not from Miami and I've never been over there. There's been no reason to go there. Just seeing how their school is and comparing it to where I went to school was really impactful.” Similarly, another student shared, “It was great to get to know a student from somewhere I usually would not have.” The language of “the other” here is particularly telling, as participants describe Liberty City as “over there” or “somewhere.” The physical geography of Miami, with a built environment, especially the interstate freeway system, does in fact separate Liberty City both physically and psychologically from the rest of Miami; indeed, there is no reason for an outsider to pass through the community without having a specific destination in mind.

For another college student, the experience of visiting the high school was especially moving:

Well I didn't want to leave because I haven't been in high school in like ten years and it was a weird feeling especially that high school because we used to play basketball there sometimes...So I didn't really want to go I just wanted to stay and talk about it more and see what we could do. Liberty City was so prevalent growing up. I grew up on the beach so I was right there.

The reflections of this student was echoed by other participants when discussing their experience. These comments underline the power of experiential learning. Life for young people in urban environments can often be isolating, with few opportunities for real, sustained connections with those outside of their social and familial networks. But with very little

encouragement, the students in the EOYM academy readily embraced the chance to step outside of their comfort zone, finding meaning and fulfillment in the unknown.

***Seeking deeper connections, coming up short.*** The second theme speaks to the sheer willingness of EOYM participants to engage with one another, to find common ground and connections, but also the difficulties inherent in trying to accomplish this goal in a short amount of time and with participants from varying backgrounds. For some students, this challenge was related to personal characteristics that made connecting difficult: “In a classroom I'm very quiet. I think if we got time to be with the students ourselves...I don't know how that'll go over with parents but I think it needs to be more about the team like not in a classroom.”

The idea of not having enough time to really establish a meaningful connection emerged in similar comments, such as the suggestion from one student that they needed “more time to make those connections and more intimate settings like ice breakers. Like more time building a stronger connection.” The desire on the part of the college students, all of them graduating seniors, to be able to share with the high school student what they had learned during their time at the university was also a common refrain: “I wish there was more of that interaction because there's so much more that we can teach you guys going into this field.” Other students saw this lack of time needed to connect and frustration with wanting to teach the high school students as emerging from the structure of the academy itself: “Give us a list of what you want us to teach.”

Participant observation was also helpful in building this theme around the lack of engagement within the instructional part of the Academy, in which it was hoped that most of the teaching would take place between mentors and mentees. According to observed activity within the classroom, there were clearly times when this was not happening. Among the observations from the research assistant charged with monitoring the Academy are the following notes: “FIU students handle equipment”; “Apprentice sitting alone & using phone while waiting for class to start. Not communicating with mentors”; “Mentors were the ones answering all the questions

about the video they all watched, not apprentices”; “At least one group hadn’t exchanged contact information. Group didn’t know an apprentice was going on a trip over the weekend”; “Apprentices are mostly quiet and kept to themselves.”

As these notes make clear, the idea of creating a classroom of shared, co-curricular learning is wonderful in theory; the reality of what that space of learning will look like in practice is far more nuanced and complicated. Focus groups, interviews, and survey results all show a high level of engagement among both groups. However, this does not change the fact that the experiential gap between young high school students from an underserved high school and college seniors from often more privileged backgrounds was sometimes too wide to bridge in the short time that they had together.

While perhaps an important clue as to ways in which future Academies might work to foster a more inclusive and collaborative environment, the findings from this theme do not detract from the real bonds that were formed during these academies. As a reminder of this accomplishment, it is worth concluding with the following comments:

- “You know somehow I'm picking him [the apprentice] up every day or taking him home every day. And I never signed up for it but I don't mind.”
- “I love the high schoolers. These high schoolers want to be here. They have a desire to be in this industry, to create something magical.”

***Finding a voice in the face of institutional and cultural indifference.*** Because of the nature and goals of the academy, students, teachers and organizers spent a lot of time reflecting on their own experiences living in, and in many cases, growing up in Miami, as well as the power of media narratives to shape the ways in which they understood the city and the communities they are from. Often times, these discussions revolved around Liberty City, which, as one high school student said, is often “portrayed as filthy, violent, uneducated. It has flaws but it has good things, too. It’s not that bad.”

As with the Starbucks comment from the previous section, this remark deserves greater attention. Within the student's reflection is the acknowledgement of the power of outside observers to marginalize and stigmatize a community struggling against decades of racial, economic and socio-political isolation. At the same time, there is the recognition that these perceived "facts" about life in an impoverished community of color are not universal nor accurate. Emerging from these conversations was a phenomenon that will be familiar to media literacy educators and scholars, a continual assertion that there is power in giving these students the ability to tell their own stories and provide a counter-narrative based on empowerment and sharing their own truths.

Another comment from one of the EOYM apprentices (as the mentees were called), recognizes the stark realities of a culture of indifference and apathy when it comes to thinking about and addressing the inequalities and injustices that continue to define life in a community like Liberty City:

I think there isn't really much we can do as people because everybody's busy, everyone's working, everybody's in the loop of having to keep on working. People get tired. And they say, "All right, we fought our fight and did what we can and succeed. And now it's left to the next generation." Personally that's what I feel is important because now it's on me, it's the people that I'm around.

Within this observation is both the recognition that the hurdles to overcoming indifference are high, and not just because people may not care. They just don't have the space, physically and mentally, to care *more*. Which is an accurate if dispiriting truth about life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as we are confronted by the harsh realities of late capitalism: growing inequality, austerity governance, the hollowing out of the welfare state, and the increasing precarity of day-to-day existence for a majority of the population, all taking place at the same time as the extreme accumulation of wealth in the upper echelons of society. However, at the same time, the student, rather than ending on a note of despair, turns the corner. If everyone else is too tired to care, this just means that it's on him to take up the mantle of struggle, and now *he* is

responsible for inspiring and bringing along those around him. This theme of working together towards shared goals wove its way throughout the EOYM Academies, and in many ways is one of the strongest and most positive outcomes of this initiative.

A comment from one of the college students, talking about the experience of being a mentor, is a similar reflection on overcoming a sense of apathy and despair that the struggle for equality and justice is no longer a possible or even necessary:

...we get to put them out there, we get to help them expand and show people that there's still good in the world. There's still people doing amazing things. Like, they're making houses for a group of people that come from nothing. So this is beautiful. This is amazing.

In this case, the students were working on a film about Habitat for Humanity. During the course of the production, they were able to see a community come together around the powerful idea of providing families with a basic life necessity: a safe, comfortable, and secure place to live. In doing so, the horizons for the possibilities for creating real and lasting good in the world were expanded, and the students came away with a documentary that showed this experience and can now be shared with others.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

What emerges from the analysis above is a complicated picture of an innovative and forward-thinking co-curricular initiative, the Eyes on Your Mission Academy, that has in many ways accomplished the goals set out by organizers and sponsors, but at the same, has plenty of room for future growth and improvement. This is actually a very good place to be. No teaching efforts, especially those as intricate, involved, and complex as EOYM, are immediately successful. There are simply too many variables contained within the work of the academy, some that can be controlled for and others that cannot, to believe that everything will function smoothly on day one. The many moving parts of this effort should certainly inform and moderate any expectations of perfection from the outset, from the partnerships with non-profits, the expectations placed on high school and college students to work together, and the

wealth of material shared and covered in the classroom, to the time limits of the Academy related to funding and working within the academic school year.

So, according to the data collected, where did the Academy find its greatest success? First, the exposure to cutting-edge digital media technologies, like digital SLR cameras, high quality audio gear, non-linear video editing systems, 360 degree video, and drone videography almost guaranteed that students would find this experience enriching and beneficial. The survey results reflected this reality. Cool tech toys are fun; getting to go out and shoot interesting stories, engage with non-profits doing important and compelling work in the community is compelling and immersive; and in the end, being able to see that work take form in a tangible, high production value piece of content that can be shared and admired meant that there would be a portion of this academy that appealed to nearly everyone.

Secondly, the desire for connections between mentors and mentees and the ability to build those bonds was real. This came through in both the survey results as well as the focus groups and interviews. It was clear that the opportunity to work across academic, geographic, social-economic, and even racial lines was one that Academy participants recognized and appreciated, and this is no small feat. The amount of planning and organization that took place in order to create this kind of opportunity for a group of diverse students should not go unrecognized or unappreciated.

Finally, the goal of the academy to open students' eyes to the power of media narratives in shaping the views and perceptions of our communities and cities, where we live and with whom we interact, and the experiences we have that are mediated through storytelling was present in all the data collected. Responses to the survey revealed a clear desire among respondents to work with a non-profit in the future and continue to produce media and storytelling that take on some of society's most pressing issues and highlight the need for equality and social justice, as well as to support groups that are doing this work every day.

If the above findings highlight the successes of the EOYM Academies, where did the initiative fall short of its desired outcomes? Communication and organization appeared to be a key concern throughout the responses. This is most likely related to the compressed timeframe of EOYM, the complicated nature of the academy, and all that was hoped to be achieved in a relatively short amount of time. Difficulties in coordination with the non-profit clients could have been addressed with an on-boarding process that should have been completed prior to the start of the Academies, since the frustration and stress of trying to set up interviews and locations shoots in a brief time window were only compounded by failures in coordination between all parties that were involved. While organizers faced significant obstacles in bringing on the non-profit clients, many of which were beyond their control, it still needs to be recognized that as a result, the work of the teams and their ability to carry out their assignments was significantly impacted.

The organization within the classroom was also an area where participants felt some improvement was needed. Students wanted fewer lectures, more hands on time with the equipment, and on the part of the mentors, there was a strong desire to have organizers and professional instructors step out of their way and let *them* teach the apprentices, since that was part of the whole appeal of the academy for them in the first place. Future academies would do well to consider carefully where the curriculum could be streamlined or pared down significantly, as well as look for opportunities where lesson plans that may have been envisioned as lectures with handouts could instead be converted into hands-on workshops, with mentors and apprentices taking the lead.

Finally, while there are clear successes that should be highlighted and embraced, there emerges from this analysis some specific shortcomings in creating a teaching environment that would truly foster the kind of culture of engaged learning and commitment to creating media for social good on which EOYM was premised. In order to have even greater success in the future, Eyes on Your Mission and similar initiatives have to focus on building a shared sense of purpose and commitment. As outlined above and explored in other research, urban environments like

the one in which EOYM took place are increasingly neoliberal spaces of alienation and isolation that promote individualism over community, and consumerism over the building of collective social good. Thus, to counteract these larger societal forces, the classroom must become a space of vulnerability, transparency, and deep engagement. Mentors and mentees should be given as much time as they need in order to connect and bond with one another. Within this framework, organization is key. Students are sensitive to chaos and will follow that lead. Outcomes and expectations should be clear from the beginning. There is also the need to recognize power dynamics among the different moving parts of the academy. With students of varying ages, backgrounds, and life experiences, this is especially important. Once young people have the sense that there is a lack of unity and shared vision within academy leadership, that impression is especially hard to shake and can have an impact on whether they emerge from the experience as fulfilling and enriching as it might have otherwise been.

The value of initiatives like Eyes on Your Mission Academy cannot be overstated. To underline this point, it is worth sharing some reflections on the Academy that come from the Liberty City high school teacher who played an essential and integral role in helping to craft the goals and aspirations of EOYM, as well as recruit students from her classes to participate:

I have seen firsthand what potential this program has to not only educate people, but transform their trajectories. It has done so for my students (as well as Dr. Shumow's) in ways that I could not have imagined or tangibly done on my own...The beauty and brawn of the EOYM concept and brand is such that each experience is unique to its participants which includes an entire community of people working in tandem on a complex system that produces amazing work...Our people are our process.

In an era of increasing polarization among different factions of society, much of it either generated or fostered by the mediated narratives that surround us every day, the opportunities for connection, empathy, and empowerment through media production provided by EOYM are scarce and yet more important than ever. It is this researcher's sincere hope that Eyes on Your Mission and programs like it will continue to find funding, support, and success in this work. It is too valuable not to.

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