



## **Blazing A Trail:**

### *Examining the Impact of the Camp Experience Among LGBT Youth*

Prepared by: YMCA of San Diego County, Youth & Family Services



## Summary

In August 2018, the YMCA of San Diego County Youth & Family Services, in partnership with the San Diego County Our Safe Place Collaborative, hosted Camp Trailblazers, the first-ever camp dedicated to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) young adults in San Diego County. The two-day experience built upon the structure of the renowned YMCA overnight camps by building leadership skills and peer support networks among a population of youth that have historically faced social isolation, bullying, and disconnection for their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

Designed as a pilot program, the camp sought to determine the impact of a social opportunity geared specifically to LGBT young adults on the population's ability to simultaneously build a sense of self-empowerment and connection among peers. Specific goals for camp participants included:

- ***Developing new, supportive relationships***
- ***Building increased resiliency***
- ***Increasing a sense of empowerment and self-esteem***
- ***Reducing negative emotions***

The following brief discusses why LGBT young adults need to build resilience and personal connection, the results from the pilot project, and recommendations for bringing the model to scale to ensure all youth are given the chance to thrive regardless of their background.

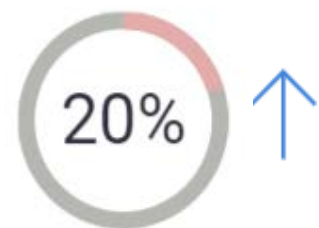
A summary of results reveals that:



of campers made  
LGBT Friends at  
Camp Trailblazers



of campers expressed  
feeling empowered  
after attending Camp  
Trailblazers



Of campers  
increased self-  
confidence and  
knowledge of de-  
stressing techniques

## Background

### *A Vulnerable Population*

The United States Supreme Court ruling establishing marriage equality as law in 2015 did not bring sweeping, immediate acceptance of the LGBT community. In the years since, legal battles at the state and federal levels have threatened recently granted rights and sought to limit the ability of LGBT individuals to fully participate in society as married couples, parents, or members of the armed forces.

To a young person considering his/her/their identity and sexual orientation, these actions convey the message that LGBT individuals still lack acceptance in mainstream society. This sentiment is reflected among the 10,000 youth surveyed by the Human Rights Campaign (HRC). According to the national survey, a striking majority of youth (92%) say they hear negative messages about an LGBT identity.<sup>1</sup> Further, 77% of LGBT youth surveyed reported feeling depressed over the past week, more than 70% reported feelings of worthlessness in the past week, and 67% reported that they've heard family members make negative comments about LGBT people. Only 26% say they always feel safe in their school classrooms, and just 5% feel supported by all of their teachers and school staff.<sup>2</sup> LGBT youth are about twice as likely as their peers to have been verbally harassed and called names outside of school as well as to have been physically assaulted outside of school.<sup>3</sup>

When the environments where youth spend the majority of their time are unwelcoming and unsupportive, LGBT youth are left with limited opportunities to feel meaningful connection. This disconnection leaves youth vulnerable to manifesting that sense of hopelessness through risky behaviors or adverse experiences that often lead to reliance on expensive public support systems. Studies reveal that LGBT youth are more than twice as likely to experiment with alcohol and drugs<sup>4</sup> and have a 120% higher chance of experiencing homelessness

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<sup>1</sup> Growing Up LGBT in America (Rep.). (2017, June 7). Retrieved [https://assets2.hrc.org/files/assets/resources/Growing-Up-LGBT-in-America\\_Report.pdf?\\_ga=2.167820065.1255283380.1546541961-133802073.1546541961](https://assets2.hrc.org/files/assets/resources/Growing-Up-LGBT-in-America_Report.pdf?_ga=2.167820065.1255283380.1546541961-133802073.1546541961)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Growing Up LGBT in America (Rep.). (2017, June 7). Retrieved [https://assets2.hrc.org/files/assets/resources/Growing-Up-LGBT-in-America\\_Report.pdf?\\_ga=2.167820065.1255283380.1546541961-133802073.1546541961](https://assets2.hrc.org/files/assets/resources/Growing-Up-LGBT-in-America_Report.pdf?_ga=2.167820065.1255283380.1546541961-133802073.1546541961)

compared to non-LGBT youth.<sup>5</sup> The population also reports a suicidality rate that is 40% higher than non-LGBT peers.<sup>6</sup> This statistic in particular demonstrates the devastating results that can occur when youth lack a supportive environment that empowers them and builds feelings of self-worth.

### *Increasing Resilience*

In spite of these statistics and a history of being discriminated against, LGBT youth grow into resilient individuals who thrive when surrounded by a safe and supportive environment.

The brain is designed to be social, and humans need relationships and a sense of belonging to thrive,<sup>7</sup> and the absence of relationships negatively impacts brain development, health, and wellbeing.<sup>8</sup> Many vulnerable youth, including those who have felt marginalized for their sexual identity, navigate the complexities of adulthood without the relationships necessary to maintain stability and are at a disadvantage during their transition to adulthood.

New research suggests a glimmer of hope exists for this group of youth, and it lies within self-regulation. Self-regulation helps organize thoughts, emotions, tasks, and behaviors to set and achieve goals. Individuals are exposed to a dynamic set of complex cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes, and successful self-regulation lays a foundation for lifelong functioning, and functioning well, in society.

The concepts of co-regulation and connection are important elements necessary for self-regulation.<sup>9</sup> Co-regulation is an interactional process between a youth and a supportive person (teacher, parent, foster parent, social worker, mentor, etc.) that is warm and responsive. When a youth connects with others in this way, they feel safe and secure, further reducing demand on already overloaded cognitive and emotional centers.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Morton, M.H., Dworsky, A., & Samuels, G.M. (2017). Missed opportunities: Youth homelessness in America. National estimates. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

<sup>6</sup> James, S. E., Herman, J. L., Rankin, S., Keisling, M., Mottet, L., & Anafi, M. (2016). The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey. Washington, DC: National Center for Transgender Equality.

<sup>7</sup> Black, J. (2017, November). Neuroscience: A Critical Component to the Core of Social Work Practice. Presentation at the Moving Toward Neuroscience-Based Social Work Conference, Los Angeles, CA.

<sup>8</sup> Umberson, D. & Montez, J. (2010). Social relationships and health: A flashpoint for health policy. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 51 (S), 54-66.

<sup>9</sup> Murray, D. W., Rosanbalm, K., & Christopoulos, C. (2016). Self-regulation and toxic stress report 4: Implications for programs and practice (Vol. 97). Report.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

Knowing that strong support systems and intimate relationships foster well-being has significant implications for helping youth increase these critical internal assets. LGBT youth represent an especially appropriate population for whom a positive and nurturing experience can be the difference between prolonged feelings of disconnection or a successful transition to adulthood as a contributing member of society.

### *About Our Safe Place*

The YMCA of San Diego County understands the obstacles facing LGBT youth and commits to serving all people. The organization welcomes and values individuals of all ages, races, ethnicities, religions, gender expressions, abilities, sexual orientations, and financial circumstance and offers programs and services that embrace diversity and reflect the people and needs of the community.

For LGBT youth, up to age 21, and their families, the YMCA offers the Our Safe Place Program, funded by the County of San Diego and operates the program in collaboration with three youth-serving organizations in the region: San Diego Youth Services, South Bay Community Services, and YMCA Youth & Family Services. Together, the organizations comprise the Youth Outreach Collaborative, which has served vulnerable youth countywide with supportive programs and connections to resources since 1998. The collaborative operates a total of three Our Safe Place centers throughout the county, sharing expertise and assets to improve the lives of San Diego's LGBT youth and their families.

The program is primarily housed in an open access center, a physical safe space, where participants gather to connect to local resources and take part in psycho-education workshops, social activities, and regularly scheduled meetings with their case manager. The program places an emphasis on offering individual and family therapy so youth develop the emotional and physical wellbeing to ensure the feelings of safety cultivated in the program's drop-in center continue for the youth once they leave the premises. The YMCA specifically serves more than 230 youth annually in North County San Diego.

Additional services and support are available to youth in partnership with the North County LGBT Center, Hillcrest Youth Center, and LGBT student groups at San Diego State University, Mira Costa College, and California State University San Marcos.

Our Safe Place has highlighted the need for homogenous and supportive environments to help LGBT youth mature during a key stage of post-adolescent development. Access to a dedicated, immersive LGBT experience, such as an overnight camp, is the next step in a continuum of service that ensures our LGBT youth feel welcome, safe, and supported as much as their non-LGBT peers.

## *Camp Structure*

The YMCA operates the oldest organized youth camp in San Diego, aligned with a global movement that has successfully helped youth grow their sense of identity, social skills, motor and mental skills, and values. The residential camp experience is a formative one that can afford youth, especially those who feel marginalized for their identity, a chance to escape everyday stressors and develop connections not easily cultivated nor replicated in traditional educational or social settings.

However, LGBT young adults have limited options to engage in structured socialization activities with their LGBT peers. Those that do exist are offered at a price that excludes low-income populations and present barriers to youth development opportunities that will benefit them for the rest of their life.

Camp Trailblazers builds on the scientific data that highlights the importance of relationships and brings that experience to the identified population to help them build resilience and a sense of connection with others.

During camp in August 2018, youth stayed in supervised bunk accommodations, received meals for the duration of the weekend, and participated in activities that fostered:

- Leadership – in addition to traditional activities that foster teamwork, youth attended workshops that explore identity and belonging and were given opportunities to apply lived LGBT experience and lead by example.
- Civic engagement – youth spent part of camp time learning about historical figures in the LGBT community with the Know your Queerstory: an LGBTQ history timeline activity.
- Peer support – Activities such as archery, swimming, rock climbing, tie-dyeing t-shirts, and many rounds of Gaga Ball facilitated healthy connections to help youth develop supportive bonds and learn skills to properly engage in relationships in spite of any previous trauma. The program also incorporated mindfulness activities to focus on peer interaction, active/reflective listening, and creating empathy.

The activities helped camp attendees strengthen their self-esteem to be able to call upon that sense of self-worth even when faced with discrimination. An understanding of civic engagement oriented youth to their role in the community and identified opportunities to feel a stronger sense of connection to the world around them. Finally, peer support activities were crucial for helping LGBT youth

develop positive long-lasting relationships that can help calm feelings of hopelessness in the future.

Camp Trailblazers sets the foundation for a productive transition to adulthood and lifetime of sustained independence by equipping this vulnerable population with the skills and social supports to increase resilience in the face of personal or interpersonal crises.

## **Participant Demographics**

The YMCA hosted 21 camp attendees over the two-day camp weekend. Attendees fell within the age range of 18-21, which allowed youth to attend camp and participate in activities without the need for parental consent. A majority (70%) of participants identify as transgender or non-binary.

Focusing on the young adult, or transition age youth, population is significant as research identifies this period of time as a crucial phase of neurological development, second only to early childhood.<sup>11</sup> However, the majority of data on the LGBT youth experience, including the background data cited in this report, focuses on youth slightly younger than the intended population of camp attendees. More research is needed throughout the field to improve our understanding of what LGBT young adults experience as they transition to adulthood.

The findings from this report build knowledge about a specific subset of the LGBT population undergoing a critical period of transition during adolescence to adulthood to better inform service delivery and direct strategic investment in programs that improve outcomes that help youth build resilience.

## **Methods**

The YMCA evaluated the success of Camp Trailblazers using surveys and questionnaires administered to each youth before and after participating in the camp. Assessments created by the program measured self-esteem, leadership, personal connections, and confidence.

The pre-survey was administered online as a self-assessment during the camp registration process. The post-survey was administered in-person at the end of the camp, along with a separate evaluation of the camp experience to measure

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<sup>11</sup> National Network For Youth, *What Works to End Youth Homelessness*, Retrieved from <https://www.nn4youth.org/wp-content/uploads/2015-What-Works-to-End-Youth-Homlessness.pdf>, on Feb. 16 2018

satisfaction and collect qualitative data. In the post-survey, an additional item was added to measure feelings of empowerment, though a discernible change was difficult to quantify without a corresponding pre-survey item. The question was received favorably among attendees and has led staff to focus on empowerment for the next camp session.

In future camp sessions, surveys will be administered in the same manner for consistent measurement. Fifty-percent of camp attendees from the pilot session have already expressed commitment to return for the next session.

A copy of the survey and full analysis of camp assessment results is included in the appendix.

## Results

Camp Trailblazers attendees left camp with a strong sense of self-esteem, the ability to self-advocate, and a network of supportive connections to call upon when faced with adversity in life.

### *Increased Internal Assets*

Three of the survey items sought to measure youth's ability to regulate emotions (knowing de-stressing techniques), self-confidence, and a deep understanding of self. All three scores increased in the post-survey, with knowing de-stressing techniques and confidence in self items increasing by 20%.

*"Being able to spend time at a place I love (Camp Marston) with other LGBT folks was very empowering."*

These internal assets are critical for youth to increase resilience in the face of past trauma and develop skills to call upon in future instances of adversity and hopelessness.

### *Increased Connection to Community*

*"The most impactful thing was the strong friendships I gained from this camp."*

Five of the survey items measured how youth connect to their surrounding community through assessment of leadership qualities, knowledge of supportive resources, and their vision for the future. All items demonstrated an increase in the post-survey, ranging from 15% to 70% increases.



Fostering a strong sense of community for a population of that has historically been marginalized carries a sense of empowerment and helps youth understand how they fit into and can contribute to their community. This knowledge instills a sense of agency and can inspire youth to remain resilient in the face of external adversity.

### *Increased Relationships*

Two of the survey items asked youth to evaluate their relationships by asking respondents to identify if they have LGBT friends and strong relationship skills. Post-survey responses resulted in an increase in the LGBT friends item, indicating that attendees gained more LGBT friends after the weekend.

*“Both Saturday and Friday night, almost all of my fellow campers hung out in my room and included me in conversations. I often don’t feel like people actually want to hang out with me, but these people did. That was pretty cool.”*

The only item to decrease in the post-survey was strong relationship skills, by a difference of 15%. Staff reason that youth started the camp experience with an over-confident understanding of what constitutes a strong relationship. However, the camp’s focus on relationship-building made youth realize there were additional skills they could acquire to improve their interpersonal relationships.

Because LGBT youth can face widespread discrimination or family rejection, it is important for them to develop a supportive network to call upon in times of crisis instead of relying on resource-intensive public assistance. The camp experience taught youth the important role relationships play in their life while simultaneously introducing them to peers who can form that supportive network.

### **Concluding Recommendations**

While the sample size was narrow, the results are promising. Quantitative and qualitative outcomes demonstrate that dedicated spaces and opportunities for LGBT youth to feel supported and express their truth result in increased feelings of self-worth and encourage connection among peers.

Based on the pilot Camp Trailblazers experience, the YMCA offers the following recommendations:

- Build the field of knowledge: investing in research and programs for LGBT transition age youth will increase our understanding about the diverse needs and potential interventions for this population that will improve their overall wellbeing. Even small investments in non-experimental designs, like the

YMCA's, are valuable in uncovering more about this unique population and informing innovation in services.

- Offer inclusion as well as shared life experience: Opportunities for youth of similar backgrounds to gather are just as important as opportunities for inclusion among peers from different backgrounds. Youth benefit from being able to relate to one another and support one another through shared experiences.
- Staffing is paramount: LGBT programs, regardless of their setting, are only as successful as the staff who operate them. Staff must be attuned to the needs and backgrounds of LGBT youth and operate in a trauma- and culturally informed manner.

By demonstrating a commitment to diversity, inclusion, and protecting an individual's ability to express themselves in a safe way, Camp Trailblazers enabled youth to explore and celebrate identity in all its forms. Youth gained a sense of empowerment from this experience and cultivated a Safe Place within themselves to generate meaningful connection to the world around them.

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to express gratitude for the partnership of Our Safe Place collaborative members San Diego Youth Services and South Bay Community Services. Additional support was provided through collaboration with the North County LBGTQ Resource Center and GLSEN San Diego. YMCA Camp Marston also played a significant role in the execution of the pilot camp project by offering clients access to overnight camp and subsidizing the costs. Fiscal support for the Our Safe Place program is provided by the County of San Diego Health and Human Services, Behavioral Health Services.

### **About the YMCA of San Diego County**

The YMCA of San Diego County is dedicated to improving the quality of human life and to helping all people realize their fullest potential as children of God through the development of the spirit, mind and body.

# APPENDIX

Copy of Participant Self-Assessment – administered online during pre-camp registration

On a scale of 1-5, 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree

	Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
I feel empowered.	1	2	3	4	5
I have a vision for my future.	1	2	3	4	5
I have strong relationship (friend/family/romantic) skills .	1	2	3	4	5
I have a deep understanding of myself.	1	2	3	4	5
I know de-stressing techniques.	1	2	3	4	5
I have LGBTQ friends.	1	2	3	4	5
I know how to engage in my community.	1	2	3	4	5
I know what leadership is.	1	2	3	4	5
I possess leadership qualities.	1	2	3	4	5
I have confidence in myself.	1	2	3	4	5
I know what resources exist for me.	1	2	3	4	5

Copy of Post-camp Evaluation – administered at camp in addition to self-assessment

**1. Please rate your Camp OSP experience in the following areas:**

	Did not meet Expectations		Met Expectations		Exceeded Expectations
A. Transportation to camp (from SD/Escondido to Camp)	1	2	3	4	5
B. Facilities	1	2	3	4	5
C. Camp Location	1	2	3	4	5
D. Camp duration	1	2	3	4	5
E. The variety of activities	1	2	3	4	5
F. Healthy meals and snacks	1	2	3	4	5
G. Values (Respect, Responsibility, Caring, Honesty)	1	2	3	4	5
H. YMCA staff LGBT and Cultural Competency	1	2	3	4	5
I. Quality of instructors and counselors	1	2	3	4	5

Other: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**2. Please respond to the following statement.**

The most impactful thing that happened at camp was:

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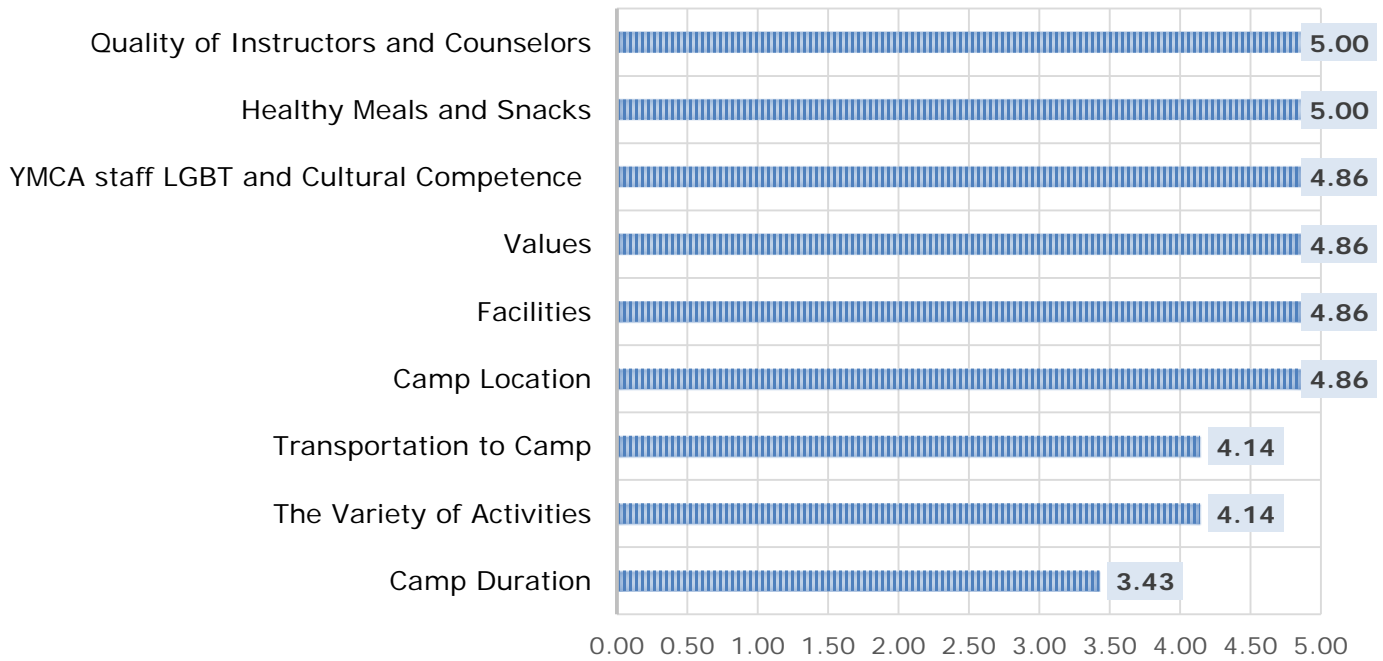
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One thing I would change about camp is: \_\_\_\_\_

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### CAMP OSP EXPERIENCE SELF ASSESSMENT (COMBINED AVERAGE N=4.57)



### Highlights of Experience Self-Assessment



**7 out of 7** of Campers Reported Camp OSP Healthy Meals and Snacks Exceeded Expectations



**5 out of 7** Campers Reported Variety of Activities at Camp OSP Exceed Expectations

**28%** of Campers Expressed Difficulty Getting To Camp Because They Had To Take Personal Transportation



**92%** of Campers Self-Reported That YMCA Staff, Instructors, And Counselors Exceeded Expectations In Quality, LGBT, And Cultural Competency

**57%** of Campers Stated that Camp Duration Did Not Meet Expectations



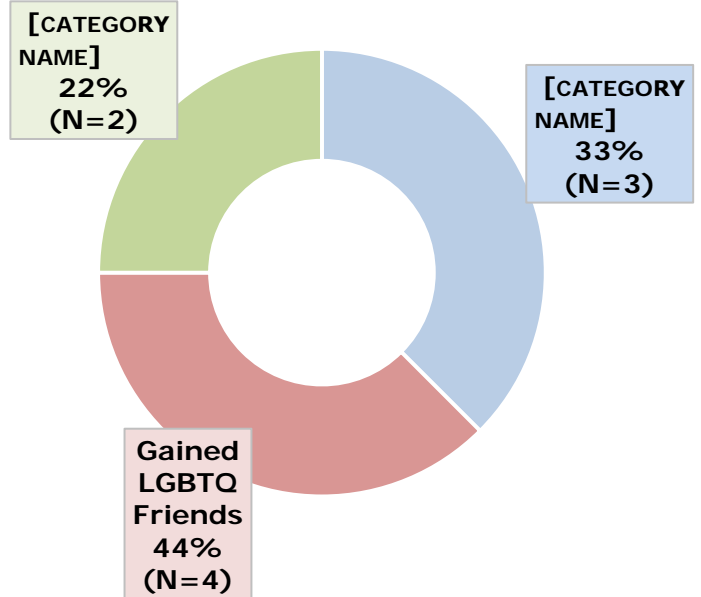
# Camp OSP: Experience and Pre/Post Self-Assessment

## Most Impactful Thing that Happened at Camp: Qualitative Themes

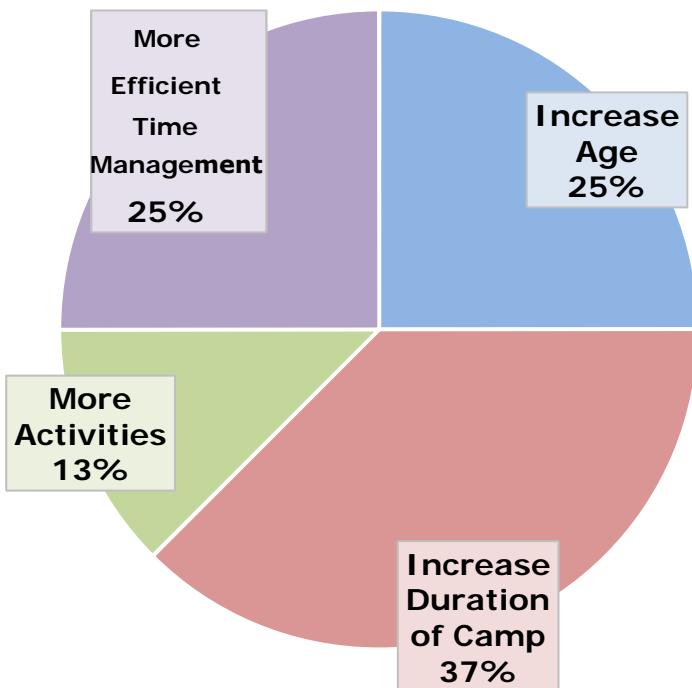
"[Learning about] [t]he timeline of queer history"

"The most impactful thing was the strong friendships I gained from this camp"

"Being able to spend time at a place I love (Marston) with other LGBT folks was very empowering"



## Camp Improvement Suggestions: Qualitative Themes



"Increase the age range some. Perhaps 18-24"

"The duration. It was awesome I wish it was longer"

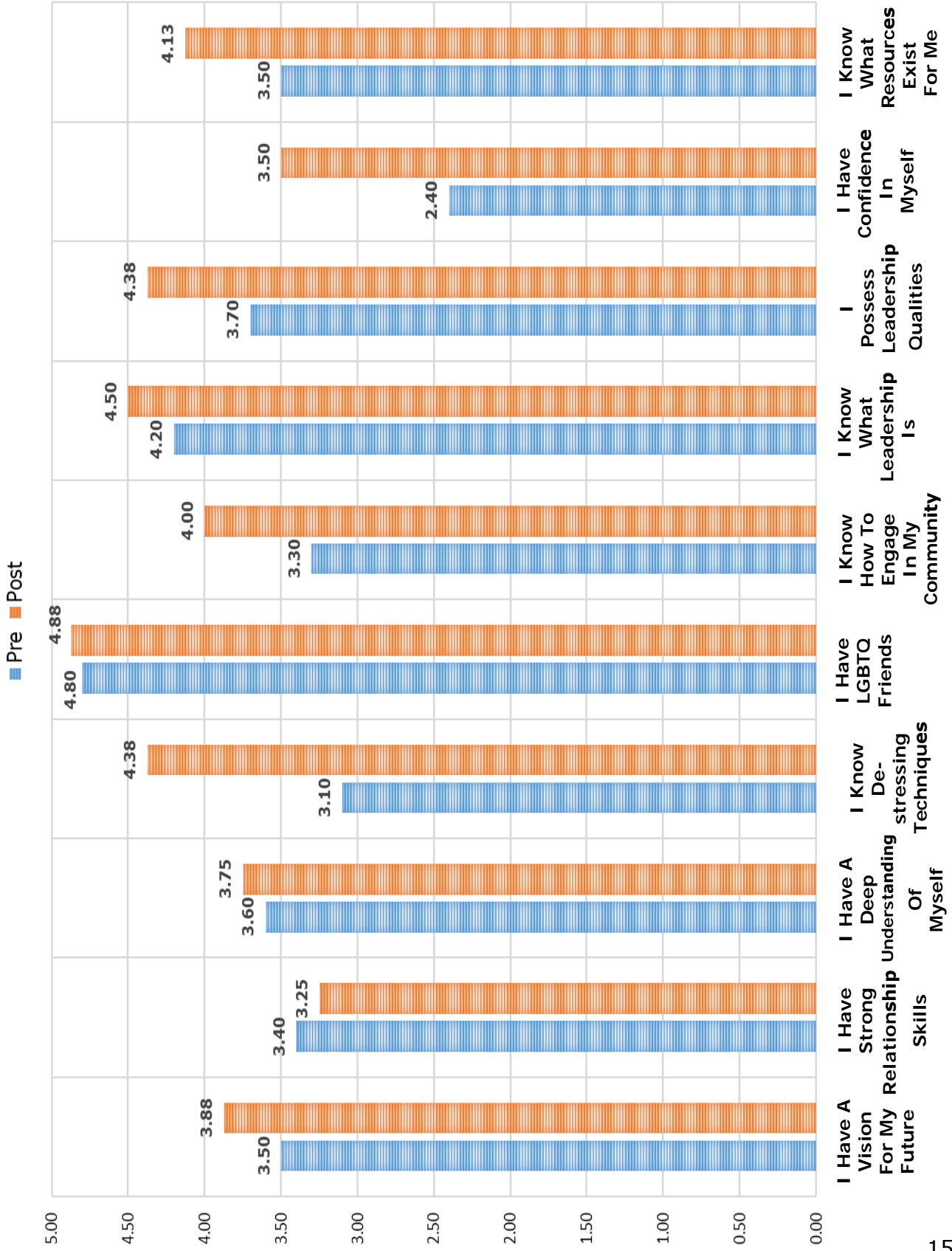
"More activities and less down-time"

"I would change it to spending more time at Marston"

# Camp OSP: Experience and Pre/Post Self-Assessment



## AVERAGE PRE VS POST SELF-ASSESSMENT RESULTS



## Pre vs Post Self-Assessment Results



**9 out of 10** Self-Assessment Items Increased Post Camp OSP



Made LGBTQ Friends At Camp OSP



Campers Expressed Feeling Empowered After Attending Camp OSP



Know De-Stressing Techniques & Confidence in Self Increased Over 20%

Pre and Post Averages	Pre Score	Post Score	Difference
Know De-stressing Techniques	3.10	4.38	1.28
Confidence in Self	2.40	3.50	1.10
Engage with Community	3.30	4.00	0.70
Possess Leadership Qualities	3.70	4.38	0.68
Know What Resources Exist	3.50	4.13	0.63
Vision of Future	3.50	3.88	0.38
Know What Leadership Is	4.20	4.50	0.30
Deep Understanding of Self	3.60	3.75	0.15
Have LGBTQ Friends	4.80	4.88	0.08
Strong Relationship Skills	3.40	3.25	-0.15
I Feel Empowered	n/a	4.13	n/a

## Stand Out Quotes and Narratives

"The most impactful thing was the strong friendship I gained from this camp. As well as how empowered I felt after camp. Best camp ever!"

"I had a great time! Can't wait for next year"

"[YMCA staff, instructors, and counselors] all were AMAZING"

"Both Saturday and Friday night, almost all of my fellow campers hung out in my room and included me in conversations. I often don't feel like people actually want to hang out with me, but these people did. That was pretty cool."