

FLA Alumni Focus Group 11/12/2010, Visalia, California (4 participants)

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SECTION 1: Learning about FLA

1) How did you first learn about FLA?

- From my high school, my teacher told me about FLA
- From a friend that did an internship in ACT, I was out of school working full time job taking a semester off
- From some girls at the College of Sequoias, Visalia (COS). They were giving out papers/flyers and talking about FLA. I then called ACT to set appointment with Erin. I was ready to give back to the community.
- From friends and family (mom): a friend, a girl from a party with COS theater kids. I got into a discussion about sexuality and being tired and frustrated of the situation. The girl mentioned ACT, she was a friend of a friend who was an alumni of FLA. 2 years went by and I got sick, depressed, I felt that I have to do something. My mom told me it will look good in my resume if I volunteered so I remembered about the ACT story my friend told me at the COS theater party and also another friend (FLA alumni) told me about ACT and she took me there.
- *Outreach capacity at participant level → through current and alumni FLA participants, friends and family;*
- *Outreach capacity at community level → through college (COS) and high school (teachers, theater group).*

SECTION 2: Motivations to enroll in FLA

2) What motivated you to apply and participate with FLA? (Participants identify and/or list general goals or specific objectives as much as possible)

- During the interview to join the FLA. There were questions about what church I went to and how I felt for being Catholic and being pro-choice. And then the first meetings made me realized I was a feminist and that these other FLA women shared the same values and beliefs I did. I found a sense of home, it was safe to say what I have to say. People wanted to hear me, a sense of being wanted, of belonging.
- Initially for me it was like entertainment. I work (every day but Sundays) and I go home living on my own, and I am lonely so the opportunity of being with a bunch of girls talking and gossiping, a place to hang out, it was cool. It takes stress away from me. And it was going to be something useful for my resume when it was time to apply for scholarships to go back to college. I needed to do something for the community. I had....something within was empty. I was living on my own, I wanted to go to school and I couldn't because I was working. I was living in this bubble, all about me, with no one understanding me, so I was looking for something to fill that space. I knew I had to do FLA to help myself do something. I was making \$15 an hour and my friends were making only \$8 per hour, but it was empty, I knew I had to go back to school.
- For me it was an opportunity, a space to give back to the community, something to do for my own experience. Be with a network of girls that became my network. I was afraid. The emptiness, not knowing anything about the community.
- I was looking to do something positive for the community, to put in my resume. But then walking in that meeting I was moved! It felt like home! I found a place to dump my frustration. I found a group of women wanting to do what I wanted to do. I thought I had to move out from this conservative place, but FLA gave me hope!
- Sense of belonging. I saw the girls first, I saw the girls in action, so I better look good because I wanted to get in.
- *FLA perceived as an opportunity to give back to the community*
- *FLA perceived as an instrument to gain a sense of belonging, to break personal isolation created by the social norms of their peers, families, and communities.*
- *FLA also perceived as an opportunity to develop professional skills for the future. e.g., work, college, leadership, public speaking.*

Note: considerations for the application process and addressing personal issues during the academy as they arise: address some of the motivations to join in (e.g., feelings of oppression, wanting to be part of a movement) besides learning leadership skills.

SECTION 3: Participation in the community before FLA

3) Were you active in your community before participating in FLA? How many of you were active before participating in the FLA?

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- I was active in the community with my family.
- I was active in the community, helping in fundraising, working with mini-clubs working with kids, women's shelters.
- Not active before FLA
- Involved in things but not giving back to the community. I did volunteer work, doing work around drama productions. I was a tutor for kids and that was very moving.
- *FLA participants report being active in the community before joining the academy*

SECTION 4: Awareness of social justice issues

4) Were you aware of the different issues girls face in Tulare County? Probe: name some of the issues and problems that face girls in Tulare County

19) Were you aware of the different issues women and girls face in Tulare County? Describe

- Teen pregnancy. I have 2 cousins pregnant at the time. My mom was the cool mom, cool with LGBT issues. But wasn't doing too much to help about it, like being an advocate
- Definitely teen pregnancy, everywhere. Gay and lesbian issues, lots of teasing in the school. School started doing rallies for not bullying. I was in 3rd grade when I heard gay the first time and in derogative ways.
- Discrimination against immigrants. I will show you that I am better than you with my education. My math teacher said I couldn't be in his class but I learned math just by looking, learning by watching. Teachers didn't want students to speak in Spanish. Also people thought I was African American. I felt discriminated against by my own friends, from people like me of color, from my conservative family. The way I speak English, my accent... people asking where I come from. I was the goodie-goodie, a good student keeping good grades.
- Disability, LGBT issues and sexual assaults. My mom and my sisters have sexual assault experiences. They were very open about that and we were warned that can happen. We were alert. I always have to be my own advocate, I didn't know anybody who was disabled. I had to know and speak out about my own disability about how to explain to other people, how to deal with my issues. We didn't have anti-bullying. So high school was super bullying specialty about sexual orientation. It was infuriating to me. I yell at people. I learned to be my own advocate; my mom encouraged me also. I learned to ask questions, to do research, to talk about it, to speak out, to initiate conversations. I can advocate for other people that have disabilities. I self-define as an able person and hard to relate to other disable person. When I meet a disabled person, we can communicate a contract we are not going there (i.e., we agree, non-verbally, to not acknowledge the disability). It's like that sympathy happens when you want to show respect by not pushing it.
- *Some level of awareness of issues face by women and girls in their social circles based on their own personal experiences. Teen pregnancy, LGBT issues, bullying, immigration issues, disability and sexual assaults.*
- *FLA raised awareness level, help participants realized that their personal issues were also the same social justice issues girls and women experience in their city, their county. Individual → experience with FLA led to awareness at the community level*

SECTION 5: Cohort Stats & reasons for dropouts

6) How many were in your original cohort and how many graduates. Were there any dropouts? If yes, do you know why some dropped out?

05-06 →

06-07 → Lisa, started with 13 and ended up with 6. Reasons for dropping out of the training: Seems like when the group (as part of the curriculum) discussed about abuse and also when we discussed pro-choice issues. Some participants were not comfortable. It wasn't safe for them to talk, work with those issues.

07-08 → Lisa

08-09 → Sarah, Jessica. Started with 22 and ended up with 10. Most dropped at the beginning and it had to do with the time commitment it seems.

09-10 → Carmen, Jessica. Started with 18 and ended up with 13. Seems like some of the participants were not ready, most of them high school students. The commitment (every Tuesday meetings, retreats, day field trips) was too much, you needed to be driven. Or personal things going on, some were immature (high school students); they were not ready for it, or parents didn't approve.

10-11 → current cohort. Started with 18.

- *All four participants claimed that when a participant dropped-out there wasn't much discussion about it, formally or informally.*

Note: considerations to address causes for drop outs, perhaps including in the FLA program mechanisms to address issues that will minimize drop outs.

SECTION 6: Personal transformation and learned skills

7) Did you achieve your objectives as you pictured them at the beginning of your training? Did the training/experience meet or exceed your expectations and if so, how?

10) Can you name skills you now have that you learned in your experience with FLA? Probe as needed--- leadership, civic engagement, advocacy skills, project development such as goals and objectives, budgets, team work, conflict identification and resolution, public speaking, negotiation, research and analysis, problem solving, community organizing, legislative advocacy.

15) Have you changed through your participation in the FLA? How so? Are you doing something that you don't think you would be doing if you had graduated from FLA? How have your feelings change and your thinking changed---the way you see yourself in the world because of this experience.

17) What changes have occurred for you through the FLA community projects? Have you experience any success?

Personal growth

- We address the full circle of personal (emotional, physical), community (social), and system (political) levels.
- FLA encourages you to come to peace with your own issues and step up to work in your community on those issues.
- When I started, I was more selfish, I was in a bubble. I wanted t learn how to talk well not so much for the community or to give back to the community but to gain something for my career, which is something I can use in the future.
- In the beginning, I felt scared but I then became an advocate.
- FLA does a magnificent job bringing an issue to have safe, deep conversations where everyone is respected. We talked about things we were not allowed to talk in this community. And all of us wanted to talk about these issues. We didn't have anybody to talk about these hard issues and FLA was the conduit, the vehicle to address all these issues.

- Sometime we will get separated into groups to get to know each other. We spoke and said what we think in a respectful way and not judging anyone. You can be young and be old. Talk about boyfriends, tests, everything you want.
- All the girls are so diverse. I would have never been friends with any of the FLA, but because what we have through the training. I am so connected to every FLA participant. School mates not being friends and became friends because of FLA.
- I am a better-rounded person. I can speak to anybody, I can get a movement going, I am the academy. I have mentored, I am a board member, I am a staff, I work at Planned Parenthood. I feel like ACT. If one day Erin was not to do it I will continue doing it. I know how to perform. Got skills as a communicator. I am more organized doing calendars, organizing tasks to do. I am being accepted at home. Tuesdays everybody is here and nobody wants to leave. It is a forever lasting bond.
- I have been transformed and given the skills and education to be the woman I want to be for myself and especially for my community. My motivations have been expanded beyond working for myself and my sisters to also work for other women that didn't have the same opportunities. I feel more confident. I know what my strengths are. I believe I can work the system. FLA develops so many connections. It is a beautiful thing. FLA is home base. My disability kept me away from other peers doing drugs and gangs. My disability kind of protected me. I could use my disability to stay away from drugs, from the peer pressure. It was so hard to see other kids with moms having boyfriends that abuse my friends. Dads who were drinking and abusing my friends. Peer pressure was so strong and it gets stronger as you get older. You go together to the same community, the same school. You can't get away. So you try to conform and be. A full personal and social change. Don't know how to explain to people how deep the change in me has been.
- It is irritating how a man moves up in corporations and women behind them would not because they don't advocate for themselves.
- My concept about government: I thought they were a bunch of white guys. But now I know I can work the system and know how to participate, civic participation; my cynicism decreased.
- Everything about me changed. Hard to talk, (crying.... Pause...)---I am a different person. I wanted to do something good. Heavily involved with drugs, and I am now completely changed. Keeping motivated to stay away from drugs. It is a completely different way of living. I can be who I want to be. I found people that don't have those interests I was so used to. My dad passed away when I was 11. My mom worked the whole time, I was alone at home or with my friends (who did drugs). Peer pressure. Now I have other friends.
- I am more active in the community, I gained confidence. I am able to talk, to be who I am, to not change myself for others. I learned how to be myself and speak from what I think in a respectful way so others can understand where I am coming from. I was always too judgmental with myself and now I am good enough. I was discriminating against myself. I was in my bubble hanging with my immigrant friends that kept me from the peer pressure of doing drugs. I have lost fears of talking, of speaking out. I am more compassionate. I go home and feel good with myself, knowing that I am impacting people. I know how to move on. I am more forgiven, less judgmental and less negative. I am healing. Embracing who I am: a woman, Mexican. I was blind and now I look at life with open eyes.
- FLA always helps me to deal with my challenges. Erin is wonderful, compassionate. The friendship and the connection I have built with other girls keep me going.

Challenges to personal growth:

- Some participants have lost some respect for/from their families and their friends. Sample 1: once my family was talking disrespectfully about being gay and my uncle is gay. I disrespected the party and my family members because I said I disagreed with their values. I had to defend my uncle. Sample 2: my family sometime asks me: Are you still working at "that" place a.k.a. Planned Parenthood? Because I am still involved with the program and the organization. Sample 3: The religion got in between me and my

aunt. I told her I was bisexual, and she couldn't understand. But that is okay with me and I can move on. I was lost and now I found myself. Sample 4: My mom gave up on me; she knows she won't change my mind. I have condoms in my house, in my car, to give them away, and she was shocked. She doesn't interfere. Sample 5: With FLA there is not making money so no good for my mom. Other people value me more than my own family. It hurts me that my mom didn't want to come to the FLA graduation. Sample 6: People don't like me because what I believe but I have learned to move on.

Skills learned

- Respect: for others, openness when listening to other FLA participants. Respect for others, openness toward other people's thoughts and ideas and values. I have learned to agree to disagree.
- Research and analysis: learning about issues, learning from each other, and how to get informed. I have gained education about the issues, about the civic process, about how important is to vote. I know I need to know who is running for political positions. I know I have to be aware of what is going on, stay informed.
- Public speaking: I wanted to learn about public speaking and I did. I learned public speaking skills. Learn how to speak to authority usually men. I got the public speaking skills. I'm not there all the way but I can talk now.
- Leadership: I wanted to learn about leadership and FLA taught me to do it. How to be a leader. How to make connection with people and engage them.
- Team building: field trips, overnight trips were great to get to know each other, to connect, to team up.
- Legislative advocacy: I learned how to get organized. How to stay on the issue: messaging
- Time management: I have learned how to manage my calendar.
- Communications: that was my main objective and I did it, I improved my communication skills. I wanted to learn how to talk to others, people not agreeing with me, public figures, how to bridge that gap, all those skills FLA was offering. I learned how to talk with people I disagree with, I know how to share about my values and dialogue.
- Advocacy: I didn't have that stuff and I knew I wanted those skills, how to advocate. I learn how to advocate for myself and others

SECTION 7: Why did you enrolled and participated in FLA training twice?

8) What do you believe helped you stay in the training and graduate?

9) For those who came back for an additional year, what were the primary reasons?

- Support, network, being connected, Erin, having somebody to share my issues, my feelings with.
- Learning important skills for the future.
- FLA provides a free space for me that is safe because I never get targeted
- I always feel respected
- Constant learning: I am constantly learning.
- I get to talk about issues that I can't talk about in my community.
- Main motivation is to continue support (leadership, emotional, and personal) through a network and refine what they get from FLA

SECTION 8: Recommendations to improve FLA

11) Can you name something that got in the way of your experience that needed to change or could be changed and make it better for the next cohort? Did your cohort or team discuss any of the named or unnamed concerns or conflicts in your experience?

12) Is there some part of the curriculum you would eliminate?

13) Is there some part of the curriculum that you would add or expand upon that isn't there now?

14) Is there some part of the curriculum that you would modify to improve its learning value?

23) Would you like to belong to the Alumni Association? If yes, how do you believe it would be of value to you and to FLA?

- Get more organized, cohort are getting more organized with time
- Maintain the “good wife” discussion.
- Families of FLA participants: Address what is going on with the families of the FLA participants e.g. church vs. condoms, sexual relationships, LGBT issues. (see Section 6)
- Fieldtrips: You need the overnight trip in the beginning to break the ice, to connect, to build the team. Do lots of heavy intensive trips which provide opportunities to open more---you open to your friends. This is one of the main reasons for motivation to stay in the program, where friendships get established.
- About the FLA Alumni: The alumni could address the issues with families of FLA participants, when the issues addressed by FLA go against the values of their families. Include some sort of way that the friendship can continue.
- Erin and FLA did a great job always checking how we felt. Erin is so good at that. Always being in charge of checking in for the relationship building of the group.
- After graduating from FLA, on my own, sometimes I don’t even know how to start talking about issues with my friends, with my peers. I want a break too, not to talk about it all the time.
- The application process/form: My motivation was different from what the application was asking for. FLA Application was irrelevant. I knew I needed to get in so I completed the application like a job application, I was selling myself. (Three out of the four said this). My motivation. There were no questions related to my motivation on the application form. *FLA Application: besides learning skills, include something about personal motivations. Participants have isolation in common, finding friends that are “like them”. Try to capture some of that in the application for FLA.*

SECTION 9: Community/System impact

16) Probe as needed: Have you been involved in any leadership, activism or action project through FLA? Which ones?

20) What has been the transformation of your community through your participation in FLA?

21) Do you think you have influence your community? How so?

22) Tell us about the community projects from last FLA? Have they been successful? How so?

- Implementation of the SB 71 and promotion of reproductive health services in Tulare
- Increase access to preventive reproductive health services
- Increase access to sexual and reproductive health products and services in pharmacies
- Create social movement in the Central Valley around policies impacting the LGBT community
- In Coming for Justice event
- Participation in the implementation of policy (SB 71) → the comprehensive sexual education in the school district wasn’t really happening, and now is going to be implemented. A full curriculum from 5th / 6th grade thru high school plus an in-service training for teachers. FLA worked with the Visalia Unified School District. We did the research, we found partners, we found an ally that became a champion to rally for the implementation of the policy.
- Meeting with decision-makers: State Senate member Roy Ashburn was very hostile (e.g., Anti-homosexual) to ACT and FLA. He originally denied interviews and meetings. But he was recently arrested for drunk driving with another man. FLA went to talk with him. He was welcoming, cordial.
- Media & Outreach: go to the park, people know we have condoms to give away. People are getting to know ACT. FLA has changed the way people see us: From a project of Planned Parenthood to a leadership development program for women and girls. TV, newspaper, radio → quoting the FLA participants, famous, god media. Participants writing and getting editorials, letters to the editor, building relationships with the media, quoted. My mom has a newspaper article of me about the reproductive rights. Some family

members even those who are disagreeing with me, got excited about me being published in the newspaper and being quoted. (Impact in the community: school teachers, politicians).

SECTION 10: Anything else?

5) Last question for everyone: Is there something we needed to ask and didn't or you want to share that was left-out in our question and discussion?

Nobody is going to be able to take away what we have gained in the FLA.