Setting Goals for Success
An Assessment of the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program’s Post-Residential Action Plan Process

What do you plan on doing with your life? Young people are often asked this question as their high school years wind down. Some of these young people have assistance from school counselors, teachers, parents, employers, and other adults in developing an answer to that question and a plan to move forward. Others are not so lucky. Youth from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, especially, might have limited access to adults with the availability to provide the support needed to make career and life decisions.

The National Guard Youth Challenge (ChalleNGe) Program, a quasi-military program for at-risk youth ages 16 to 18 gives young people from underserved communities a chance to set and plan for life goals. Participants, called cadets, strive toward fulfilling the program’s eight core components: academic excellence, health and hygiene, job skills, leadership and followership, life-coping skills, physical fitness, responsible citizenship, and community service. One of the key processes of the ChalleNGe Program is goal-setting. To support goal-setting, the ChalleNGe Program uses a process called the Post-Residential Action Plan (or P-RAP). The P-RAP process helps cadets document their short-, medium-, and long-term career goals and understand the steps needed to meet each of the goals along the way.

KEY FINDINGS

- The Post-Residential Action Plan (P-RAP) process assists cadets as they navigate the transition from the National Guard Youth Challenge (ChalleNGe) Program to the next stages of their professional growth and life goals.
- The P-RAP process aligns with research in goal-setting and adolescent development theory, including setting goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time-bound.
- Implementation of the P-RAP process and design of the P-RAP forms varies by ChalleNGe site, as does level of buy-in from program staff.
- The P-RAP may serve as a potential model for similar quasi-military programs or other programs focused on at-risk youth.
The P-RAP process has great potential to positively influence cadets’ lives after they leave the ChalleNGe Program. Yet there has been little documentation about how the different ChalleNGe sites enact the P-RAP and whether the process is implemented as effectively as it could be. To assist ChalleNGe in strengthening the P-RAP process, researchers from the RAND Corporation examined the various approaches to using the process across different ChalleNGe sites, identified key challenges in implementation at those sites, and examined existing literature to understand the best goal-setting strategies for youth. The findings could help ChalleNGe staff strengthen the P-RAP process in ways that improve the positive outcomes for the youth that they support.

How This Research Was Conducted
Researchers followed three steps, shown in the figure.

Results
The following are results from the research team’s examination of the existing literature, P-RAP forms, and discussions with ChalleNGe staff about the P-RAP process.

Goal-setting can facilitate pathways of success during adolescence and beyond. Expert literature suggests goal-setting can positively affect youths’ success in multiple areas, from school to work and social and behavioral arenas.

Three types of goals are most effective for successful youth-to-adulthood transitions. These are (1) learning-oriented goals that focus on improving a person’s skills and mastery of a task, (2) personally meaningful goals, and (3) goals that are specific and challenging yet also attainable based on the person’s abilities.

Regular and positive adult support is important to youth goal-setting. There are several successful goal-setting programs used by high schools and organizations that seek to help youth make a successful transition to adulthood. What each has in common is consistent adult support, often in the form of checking in to see how the youth is working toward meeting their set goals.

FIGURE
Three-Step Research Plan to Examine the P-RAP Process for the ChalleNGe Program

1. **Identify the factors integral to goal-setting and successful transition to adulthood**
   A review of expert literature from 2010 onward, as well as seminal research in goal-setting, enabled the research team to identify three topic areas that would inform their assessment of the P-RAP process: (1) role of the self-concept in behavioral self-regulation, (2) role of the self-concept in goal-setting, and (3) role of the self-concept in identity development.

2. **Examine P-RAP forms from select ChalleNGe sites**
   Blank P-RAP forms were collected from 15 sites during site visits and email exchanges from 2017 to 2018. Forms came in from California, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, Montana, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oregon, Virginia, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.

3. **Discuss current P-RAP practices with ChalleNGe personnel**
   Information on implementation approaches was gathered from data collected from approximately 30 site visits from 2017 to 2018 and from additional focused site visits to discuss the P-RAP at four sites (California, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin). Personnel were asked how sites used the P-RAP. If they found their form helpful, personnel were asked how it was modified and whether the P-RAP was integrated into the broader ChalleNGe curriculum.
ChalleNGe cadets might need help in forming positive self-identities. Many studies note that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds typically lack support and resources needed for successful goal-setting. One specific area of difficulty faced by this group is the development of a positive self-identity because they might have had few positive and more negative role models in their lives. A poor self-identity can be a barrier in developing career and academic goals.

ChalleNGe sites integrate seven common factors into their P-RAP process. Specifically, all sites integrate the following: (1) exploration of opportunities, (2) identification of goals, (3) creation of an actionable plan, (4) documentation with a P-RAP template, (5) support from key adults, (6) youth engagement, and (7) execution and follow-up after the residential phase of the program.

The P-RAP uses the specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time-bound (SMART) framework, which is used in postsecondary counseling and the corporate world. For example, cadets’ medium- and long-term goals are focused on placement after the program (work, school, or military), housing, and transportation. Cadets’ goals are required to be clear and specific and cover steps needed to achieve each goal, with specific time frames to stay on target.

ChalleNGe sites implement the P-RAP process differently. For example, although sites value the exploration of opportunities in the process, they have different ways of enacting this. Some sites offer experiential exploration through vocational training, P-RAP field trips to industries, businesses, and/or technical colleges, and mock interviews and resume workshops. Others offer opportunities to explore personal interests, such as coding, nature, and music, through clubs and activities. These opportunities help cadets meet their personal goals.

ChalleNGe sites see the value of the P-RAP process differently. Discussions showed that staff at some sites believe that the P-RAP process is critical, whereas staff at other sites believe that it is not particularly useful. These differences are revealed in the amount of time dedicated to the process, the number of staff involved, the level of staff and cadet buy-in, and in the variety of P-RAP opportunities presented.

The P-RAP templates align with evidence on youth goal-setting, but the P-RAP formats vary widely. An examination of the P-RAP templates from different sites suggests that they are consistent with theoretical and empirical evidence about goal-setting in adolescence. Yet they vary widely across sites. Some sites prefer structured forms, while others prefer more-open-ended forms. Although the average length of the form is 12 pages, forms range from one page to 50 pages. Most sites use a single P-RAP template, but some use separate forms for short-term, medium-term, and long-term goals. Some sites ask the cadet to complete a day-by-day calendar in which they list a constructive activity for each day of the month.

An Opportunity and Recommendations

This research suggests that many aspects of the P-RAP process are well-grounded in goal-setting and adolescent development theory and empirical evidence. In this way, the P-RAP may serve as a potential model for similar quasi-military programs or other programs focused on at-risk youth. To continue to improve the process and create an opportunity for the P-RAP process to serve as a model for other programs, the research team offers several recommendations.

Encourage deeper and more-consistent use of the P-RAP across the components of the ChalleNGe program. Site-level variation is a feature of the ChalleNGe Program because of regional differences. However, moving toward a more standardized approach in some areas of the P-RAP process has the potential to strengthen the program and thus better prepare participants for long-term success. For example, the research
suggests that sites that weave the P-RAP through multiple aspects of the ChalleNGe program come closer to the principles discussed in the theoretical and empirical literature, and there is some evidence that this leads to greater success. Both staff and cadets take more ownership of the process at these sites.

Ensure adequate exploration to identify meaningful goals. Identifying career and academic goals might be especially challenging for youth from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, which suggests that there is a need to provide multiple experiences for cadets to learn about and explore their options. Although some sites do offer in-depth exploration activities, others might want to expand these opportunities. The sites that offered various opportunities also noted a high degree of both cadet and staff buy-in and engagement. These sites might serve as models of promising practices for other sites that offer fewer opportunities.

Help cadets outline goals that are specific, challenging, and attainable with appropriate time metrics. Sites that follow the SMART goal-setting framework generally adopt a fine-grained approach to time metrics for P-RAP goals. Goals written with more-fine-grained time metrics (e.g., identify three methods to reduce stress by week three), might be more achievable than ones with longer time metrics (e.g., run one mile in less than 10 minutes on the weekly physical training test by graduation). Further consistency in approaches for identifying short-, medium-, and long-term goals might enhance outcomes at sites where these practices are not strictly followed. To foster a higher-quality goal-setting process, sites might wish to consider training staff and mentors in using the SMART goals framework and have cadets attempt this approach by looking at examples of completed P-RAP templates.

Incorporate learning-oriented goals into the P-RAP process. Only one site reported encouraging learning-oriented goals, such as improving personal performance, skills, or knowledge. Encouraging cadets to focus on short-term learning goals has the potential to establish an early foundation of success. Staff and mentors might need guidance in how to foster these and teach cadets the difference between learning-oriented goals (e.g., gaining knowledge for a particular trade) versus performance goals (e.g., getting the best grade in the class). Along with helping cadets seek out invaluable foundational knowledge, having learning-oriented goals could help cadets develop more-useful and more-fulfilling goals during their time in the program.