

# **Leveraging School-Library-Based After-School Programs to Motivate, Engage, and Benefit Youth from Disadvantaged Backgrounds**

## **Proposed Presentation for the 2015 Conference on Inclusion and Diversity in Library and Information Science**

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After-school programs are uniquely situated to attract and engage youth in a variety of interest-driven activities that ensure that each individual youth's personal interests are nurtured. In collaboration with school librarians at five Title I middle schools in the greater Washington D.C. metro area, we developed and implemented an after-school program, *HackHealth*, which aims to increase disadvantaged middle school students' interest in science and health, their health and digital literacy skills, and their health-related self-efficacy. Based on data collected from the 63 youth who have participated in *HackHealth* over the past two years through surveys, participant observation, pre- and post-interviews, and focus groups, we investigated why they joined *HackHealth*, the health-related topic each one selected to research during the program and the reasons for their choice, and the perceptions of participants and their parents regarding the short-term outcomes of participating in the program. We found that participants joined *HackHealth* in order to have something to do after school, learn more about health, work toward maintaining or improving their own or a family member's health, and/or prepare for a future health-related career. They tended to research health conditions that they or their family members have (or had); however, they sometimes were just curious. Participants (and their parents) reported a wide array of positive outcomes that resulted from their participation in the program, including increased interest in health topics, improved ability to find credible health-related information online, better awareness of health issues and relevant health behaviors that can help one to prevent or manage a health condition, and an ability and desire to use what they learned to help their family members and friends. In conclusion, the central importance of building on youths' personal interests and ensuring the personal relevance of both content and skills in order to attract and sustain their participation and engagement will be discussed, along with our overarching goal for the *HackHealth* program, which is to work toward closing the "participation gap" in relation to youth's digital literacy skills and eliminating current and future health disparities among Americans from diverse races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds.