APPENDIX G2:

48 MONTH SURVEY PRETEST MEMO

11/2014

This page left intentionally blank for double-sided copying.

MEMORANDUM

TO: Cynthia Miller, MDRC

FROM: Lisbeth Goble, Lauren Maul, Sandra Mukasa, and Lisa Schwartz   **DATE:** 11/24/2014
YB-71

SUBJECT: YouthBuild 48-Month Youth Survey Round 3 Pretest
Findings

A. Introduction

In preparation for the 48-month survey for the YouthBuild Evaluation, Mathematica Policy Research, under subcontract to MDRC, conducted a third round of pretests focused on the series of questions that aims to capture attributes generally associated with one's character, referred to as the "personal attributes questions." These questions originated from a formative evaluation of YouthBuild (Ferguson et al. 1996). The evaluation included one-on-one interviews with YouthBuild participants. At the end of these interviews, respondents were asked: "If someone asked you to describe yourself, to say who you are, what would you say?" The question was open-ended and responses were coded into the categories that were ultimately used to develop the first version of the personal attributes questions. (See Appendix A.)

The original version of the personal-attributes questions were tested in two previous rounds of pretests.[1] The first round included a card-sort activity with debriefing. In the second round, youth completed either interviewer-administered or self-administered questionnaires and then participated in a cognitive interview using a retrospective protocol. The first two rounds of pretests were conducted with current or former YouthBuild participants. Findings are summarized below.

The first two rounds of the pretest uncovered several issues with the original version of the personal attributes questions:

---

[1] In addition to the questions about personal attributes, the first two rounds of pretesting included questions about various activities in which youth may participate. Details of the methodology and findings from the earlier pretests were included in our June 6, 2014, memo to MDRC.

- Participants interpreted the phrase "the people you hang out with" inconsistently.[2] Participants included friends, family members, and others as people they hang out with and responded to the question series differently depending upon those included in their reference group.

- Participants were unfamiliar with some of the terms (for example, "social dexterity").

- Participants considered some of the terms redundant (for example, "Helpful" and "Friends and family come to me for advice.").

- The words and phrases used to describe personal attributes were strongly associated with those common among YouthBuild programs.

Based on the findings from the first two rounds of testing, we revised the personal attributes questions in several ways for the third round of pretesting. First, we modified the question stem so that it no longer referenced "people you hang out with." Second, we separated items grouped together into single constructs. For example, the items "Intelligent/trying to learn/ hardworking" were separated into "I make an effort to learn" and "Hardworking." And last, we tested words that were synonymous or nearly synonymous with the original words to reduce the potential bias associated with using "program language" to measure potential program impacts. The modified version of the question is in Appendix A.

The three main objectives of the third round of pretest were to (1) assess the consistency and accuracy with which participants interpreted the revised personal attributes, (2) see if an open-ended version of the question, similar to the question from the 1996 Ferguson study, was a viable alternative to the close-ended question, and (3) assess any differences in results when testing the series with non-YouthBuild participants. This memo provides an overview of the pretest design and findings, and presents recommendations based on those findings.

B. Pretest methodology

Our approach allowed us to assess both closed and open-ended approaches to measuring personal attributes. This section reviews our recruitment strategy and pretest protocols.

Recruitment. To address concerns that the original pretests did not capture responses typical of non-YouthBuild participants, we conducted this round of pretesting with students from two adult literacy programs in Chicago. These participants were in the same age span as

---

[2] The original question series asked, "Please indicate how the people you hang out with would say that each of the following describes you. Would you say the following are 'not at all like you,' 'kind of like you,' 'like you,' or 'very much like you'?"

respondents in our survey and self-identified as young adults. We had six female and three male participants. All were given a $25 gift card for their participation after completion of the interviews. Trained Mathematica staff conducted all pretest interviews. Staff from Mathematica's Chicago office conducted the first five interviews, and staff from various offices held the remaining four interviews.

Pretest protocol. The open-ended question was included as the first item in the protocol to eliminate potential priming effects. Its inclusion allowed us to assess the viability of incorporating an open-ended approach in the final version of the 48-month survey. It also allowed us to see if the words in the close-ended list were adequately capturing what participants say about themselves when not constrained by a list. Participants were then asked to complete the revised personal attributes series as they would see it in the final version of the survey.

To assess participants' interpretation of the adjectives given in the open-ended question and list of personal attributes, participants were asked to provide definitions of the terms and examples of the ways in which they demonstrate the given attributes. They were also asked whether they would categorize the adjectives they provided in the open-ended question with any of the words or phrases in the list of personal attributes. Participants were then asked how hard or easy it was to provide a list of three attributes they would use to describe themselves. The protocol is in Appendix B.

C. Findings

The main findings are documented below. For clarity of presentation, we first focus on findings from the revised closed-ended questions and then on the open-ended questions.

1. Close-ended personal attributes question

Limited variation in responses. Participants reported that the attributes were "very much like them" or "like them" over 90 percent of the time. (See Table 1.) In fact, only one participant selected the response category, "Not at all like me," in response to the item, "Friends and family come to me for advice." Although we saw a reasonable distribution of responses to the item that asked about providing advice, overall, the lack of variation raises two important concerns. First, the pattern of responses suggests that social desirability bias affects responses, and second, as written, the questions are unlikely to detect meaningful differences among participants. To illustrate both issues, during the debriefing, one participant who reported that "honest" is "very much like me" stated, "I'm somewhat honest, to a certain point. I won't betray nobody, but if I was to find some money laying in the street, I wouldn't go through the neighborhood trying to find who it belonged to. So I'm kind of honest."

Table 2. Frequency of responses for each personal attribute

	Not at all like me	Kind of like me	Like me	Very much like me
Helpful			1	8
Caring			1	8
Friends and family come to you for advice	1	2	3	3
I make an effort to learn			2	7
Hardworking		2		7
Optimistic[1]		1	1	5
Determined				9

[1]This row does not sum to nine due to comprehension issues with the term "optimistic." See discussion below.

Interpretation of terms. For the most part, participants were able to complete this series of questions without difficulty. The only word that caused obvious confusion was "optimistic." Four of the first five pretest participants were uncertain about what this word meant and asked for clarification while completing the question. For the remaining four interviews, we revised this item to "I have a positive attitude." This revision made it easier for participants to rank how much it was like them. However, when asked to describe what they were thinking of when asked if they have a positive attitude, some responses were not necessarily in line with the intended meaning. For example:

- "The way I carry myself, I keep myself up, I keep my hygiene up, I dress well, I'm not an expensive dresser, and I try to look nice."

- "When I'm around sophisticated people, educated people, [I show a positive attitude] by observing."

- "Friends and family come to me for advice" also posed some challenges for participants. The participants had difficulty responding to this item because of the double-barreled phrase. Although this was the only item that picked up a reasonable distribution of responses (previously discussed), the variation depended, in part, on whether respondents were thinking about friends and/or family in formulating their responses. Participants indicated that both friends and family did not necessarily come to them for advice. In most cases, they reported that friends are more likely to come to them for advice than are family members. For example, one participant indicated that both family and friends come for advice, but when probed on how often, he stated, "[Family] not so much because if they can work it out for themselves, they will."

Despite the relative ease with which participants completed the questions, their debriefing comments suggest that they did not necessarily understand the words as intended. Specifically, when asked to provide definitions for each item, participants failed to distinguish between many

of the terms on the list. For example, many participants were unable to distinguish between "helpful," "caring," and "providing advice." They also did not clearly differentiate among "I make an effort to learn,", "being "hardworking," and being "determined." The lack of clarity and inconsistency of interpretation suggests that, as written, the questions are not suitable for survey inclusion.

2. Open-ended personal attributes

When asked an open-ended version of the personal attributes question, most participants offered favorable terms about themselves. Some words that were repeatedly provided were "intelligent," "nice," and "trustworthy." Of the 27 words provided by participants, 2 have negative connotations, "impatient" and "annoying," and a few were neutral (for example, "independent" and "plain"). Table 2 includes all words that were provided in response to the open-ended question categorized by whether they have a positive, negative, or neutral connotation.

Table 2. List of words provided to open-ended personal attributes question

Positive	Neutral	Negative
Beautiful	Independent	Annoying
Caring	Mom	Impatient
Dependable	Outspoken	
Eagerness	Plain	
Hard worker		
Honest		
Intelligent or smart (5)		
Nice (2)		
Reliable		
Respectable		
Respectful		
Trustworthy (2)		

When asked if their self-descriptions fit with the list of close-ended items, most said yes, initially. However, we found that participants struggled when asked to think about whether the three words they provided could be grouped with any of the words in the adapted list of personal attributes. They attempted to do so in order to engage in the task, but struggled to provide logical explanations for their categorizations; for example:

- "Intelligent fits with hardworking and caring. If you're intelligent and work hard, you care about what you're doing."

- "Impatient goes with honest. I'm honest in saying I'm impatient."

- "Outspoken fits with helpful. Outspoken is being helpful; when someone asks you a question, you respond to them, be outspoken with whatever you say."

- "Annoying goes with honest."

- "Honest fits with determined and having a positive attitude. If you don't have a positive attitude, how can you be honest about anything? If you're going to do something, you've got to be honest; you show that you're going to do what you say you're going to do."

- "Eagerness fits with determined because when you are eager to do something you are determined. Eagerness is when you are going to do something no matter what. Determined is that you'll try to do something up to a certain point. Eagerness is an emotion, there are no boundaries."

Although some of the words in Table 2 align with words in the close-ended version, many do not, suggesting that the list does not adequately reflect the ways youth describe themselves. It would be difficult to develop a comprehensive list of attributes, and if we were to do so, the list would have to balance positive and negative attributes. Even with a more balanced list, it seems likely that participants will mainly provide socially desirable responses and say that the positive items are like them regardless of the "truth" of this assertion.

To assess the difficulty in completing the open-ended question, we asked participants how hard or easy it was to come up with the three terms. All of participants said it was "easy" to come up with three words to describe themselves because, as one participant stated, "It's simple enough to talk about yourself." One participant said it was very hard to come up with *just* three words because there are so many that could be used to describe them. These responses suggest that the open-ended question would be a better way to measure personal attributes.

D. Recommendations

Based on the findings from the third round of pretesting, we strongly recommend **reverting back to the open-ended question** originally used in Ferguson's 1996 study. We recognize this will require additional coding of responses; however, we believe the quality of the data received from the open-ended question will be more informative than data from the close-ended version of the question.

We see a number of benefits to taking this approach. The open-ended approach would accomplish the following:

- Retain consistency across studies and allow for cross-study comparisons of responses to the original Ferguson questions (assuming they are kept verbatim).

- Reduce respondent burden overall. The open-ended question takes, on average, no more than a minute. This is a much shorter period of time in comparison to the

closed-ended list, which can take several minutes to complete, especially if respondents are not familiar with all the words.

- Eliminate most of the social desirability bias that appeared in responses to the closed-ended list. However, we expect some social desirability bias would clearly remain as people naturally want to present themselves in a positive light.

- Eliminate the difficulty of measuring abstract concepts (such as "determined") with a single item. To date, we have not identified single terms that adequately convey the intended construct and are understood consistently across participants.

- Prevent the introduction of bias that could be introduced by using words that are part of the YouthBuild program culture.

Although it will take more time for coding on the back end, the open-ended format allows for more analytical flexibility by allowing researchers to create meaningful categories based on respondents' self-reports.

APPENDIX A

ORIGINAL AND REVISED FERGUSON QUESTIONS

Original Ferguson Questions

1. Please indicate how the people you hang out with would say that each of the following describes you. Would you say the following are "not at all like you," "kind of like you" "like you" or "very much like you?"

		Not at all like me	Kind of like me	Like Me	Very much like me
a.	Helpful/caring/loving/I can give advice				
b.	Intelligent/trying to learn/hard-working				
c.	Nice/friendly/easy to get along with				
d.	Honest/direct/sincere				
e.	Trying to make something of myself/determined				
f.	Fun/carefree/easy-going/like to party				
g.	Faith in God				
h.	Down-to-earth				
i.	Social dexterity/I can fit in				

Revised Ferguson Questions

Would you say that that is very much like you, like you, kind of like you, or not at all like you?

SELECT ONE RESPONSE PER ROW

	NOT AT ALL LIKE ME	KIND OF LIKE ME	LIKE ME	VERY MUCH LIKE ME
a. Helpful	1 ☐	2 ☐	3 ☐	4 ☐
b. Caring	1 ☐	2 ☐	3 ☐	4 ☐
c. Friends and family come to me for advice	1 ☐	2 ☐	3 ☐	4 ☐
d. I make an effort to learn	1 ☐	2 ☐	3 ☐	4 ☐
e. Hard-working	1 ☐	2 ☐	3 ☐	4 ☐
f. Honest	1 ☐	2 ☐	3 ☐	4 ☐
g. I have a positive attitude	1 ☐	2 ☐	3 ☐	4 ☐
h. Determined	1 ☐	2 ☐	3 ☐	4 ☐

APPENDIX B

YOUTHBUILD 48-MONTH FOLLOW UP SURVEY:

PRETEST QUESTIONS

YouthBuild 48-Month Follow Up Survey: Pretest Questions

Round 3: Pretest Protocol

November 2014

YouthBuild 48-Month Pretest Protocol: Round 3

Materials:

- Pretest protocol for each respondent
- Digital recorder

Administer Survey:

Thank you for your time and willingness to help us out today.

First, let me introduce myself and tell you a little bit about what we are going to be doing today.

- My name is [NAME] and I'm from Mathematica Policy Research, a research company based in Princeton, New Jersey.
- Today we need your help to test a few questions that will be part of a questionnaire that will eventually be given to a larger group of young people, like yourself. Your input is very valuable and will help us collect high quality data.
- Today's session should take about 30 minutes. Do you have any questions before we begin?

  I would like to record discussion so that I can go back and listen to it later if I need to. Is that ok?

YouthBuild Phone Pretest Timing Sheet

APPOINTMENT DATE:
TIME:
INTERVIEW START TIME:
INTERVIEW END TIME:

Comments

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Pretest Protocol

These first questions are about the way you might describe yourself.

If someone asked you to describe yourself in three words, what would you say? I'm interested in the words you would use to describe who you are as a person, not things like how tall you are, your age or what you look like. Which three words would you say describe who you are?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Now I'm going to read you some words that can be used to describe people. For each one, please tell me how well that word describes you.

[Read each item]

Would you say that that is very much like you, like you, kind of like you, or not at all like you?

SELECT ONE RESPONSE PER ROW

	NOT AT ALL LIKE ME	KIND OF LIKE ME	LIKE ME	VERY MUCH LIKE ME
a. Helpful	1 ☐	2 ☐	3 ☐	4 ☐
b. Caring	1 ☐	2 ☐	3 ☐	4 ☐
c. Friends and family come to me for advice	1 ☐	2 ☐	3 ☐	4 ☐
d. I make an effort to learn	1 ☐	2 ☐	3 ☐	4 ☐
e. Hard-working	1 ☐	2 ☐	3 ☐	4 ☐
f. Honest	1 ☐	2 ☐	3 ☐	4 ☐
g. I have a positive attitude	1 ☐	2 ☐	3 ☐	4 ☐
h. Determined	1 ☐	2 ☐	3 ☐	4 ☐

Debriefing Protocol

Before we move on let's talk about these first questions.

1) Let's go back and look at the first questions where you gave me three words that you think describe you. Let's start with the first word. [STATE WORD] Why did you choose that word? When you say that you're ___, what does that mean to you? In what ways do you demonstrate ____? Are there other words you might use that mean the same thing?

2) Let's move on to the second word. [STATE WORD] Why did you choose that word? When you say that you're ___, what does that mean to you? In what ways do you demonstrate ____? Are there other words you might use that mean the same thing?

3) Let's move on to the third word. [STATE WORD] Why did you choose that word? When you say that you're ___, what does that mean to you? In what ways do you demonstrate ____? Are there other words you might use that mean the same thing?

4) How hard or easy was it to come up with three words that describe you? What made it easy/hard?

5) What about the next set of questions – where you told me how well certain words describe you. I would like to know a little bit more about what you were thinking of when you selected your answer for each of these words.

   Let's start by just talking about what each word means to you. [**Interviewer** – *go through each word one at a time*]

   - If you had to come up with a definition for the word [FILL: e.g. HELPFUL], what would you say? How would you define it?

     (Go through each word/phrase in the table and get definitions).
     A. *[If respondent selected response options 2-4 for the item]:* Can you give me some examples of the ways in which you are [FILL: e.g. HELPFUL].
     B. *[If respondent selected response option 1 for the item]:* Why do you think this word would not be used to describe you?
     C. *[For friends and family ?]:*
     D. *If I said friends and/or family, would that change how you answered the question? What does the phrase and/or mean to you?*

E. Do both friends and family come to you for advice ? How often would you say friends come to you for advice? What about family members?

6) Let's go back and look at the three words you came up with to describe you. [START WITH FIRST WORD]. Do you think [WORD] fits with any of the words or phrases I asked about in the second question

   In-person: Hand show card to respondent with words from second question;
   By phone: Review the words again.

   - Where does it fit? Can you tell me why you would include it there? In what ways do the words mean the same thing? In what ways are they different from each other?

   - *(If self-described word fits with more than one option in second question)* Does [WORD] fit better with one of these? Which one? Why?

7) If this was the only question I asked you, do you think I would have a pretty good sense of the kind of person you are? What's missing?

Wrap-Up

We are coming to the end of our discussion. Thank you for sharing your experiences and opinions. Is there anything else you would like to add about anything we discussed today?