INTRODUCTION
1

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
1

WHO’S IN CONTROL OF CONFIDENCE?
2

HOW DOES A PURPOSEFUL DIRECTION EMERGE?
3

ARE YOU FORCE-FEEDING LEARNING?
5

A CLOSING THOUGHT...
6
What does it take to inspire youth to be active drivers of learning?

If you are reading this report, you are probably working to support young people to reach their full potential. And like GripTape, you care deeply about understanding the most powerful drivers of learning, and what it takes to put those in place.

These questions are at the core of GripTape’s approach. We started GripTape because we kept hearing from youth that they were hungry to learn, but too often were in the backseat of what and how they learned. As a result, they felt bored and disengaged. We set out to solve this problem. And we did so by turning to young people to design and launch the Learning Challenge. Since then, we’ve sought to better understand the inputs and outcomes that young people experience when they have the autonomy and resources to pursue their learning interests and passions.

Readers familiar with GripTape may have seen our previous findings on the transformative nature of the Learning Challenge. Youth gain self-confidence and a new fire for learning. They’re using skills like time-management and goal-setting, and actively taking responsibility to pursue and create new learning paths. And these outcomes endure months, and now years, after GripTape.

We’re excited about these outcomes—and they’ve also opened up new questions for us on how to best spark and support learning and development in young people. We’ve shared some of these questions in this report, and we hope that you’ll join us in pursuing the answers and exploring what it takes to fire up young people’s passion to learn.

Research Methodology

GripTape conducted interviews with 51 youth who completed their Learning Challenge anywhere from 6–24 months prior, and 25 interviews with parents of these young people (or other adults youth identified as able to speak to their experiences since completing GripTape). We also administered surveys to youth at the end of their Challenge to understand their experiences and learnings over the 10-week period, and again to the group of youth who completed their Challenge 6–24 months prior to assess the sustained impact of their participation long after their journey. Across these interviews and surveys, we see strong evidence of changes to youth beliefs, mindsets, skills, and actions that represent powerful shifts in how they approach and engage in learning activities and broader life experiences.
WHO’S IN CONTROL OF CONFIDENCE?

Are your efforts to support young people instead stealing their authentic confidence?

Could you actually be blocking the very learning mindsets and behaviors that youth need to thrive? As parents and educators, we often think that youth need us to shape the areas and ways that they learn. But in guiding what and how they should—and shouldn’t—learn, we may actually be robbing them of the chance to build confidence and exert autonomy for their own learning interests. And this duo of confidence and a sense of control could be one of the biggest keys to unlocking powerful mindsets and behaviors that drive their ongoing learning.

Through nine Learning Challenges, we’ve seen that giving young people the opportunity to drive their own learning spurs their self-confidence to new heights. Every adult interviewed noted increased confidence in youth as a result of their learning journey, and young people overwhelmingly agree.

“Although I may have doubted myself, I learned to work hard and believe in myself, no matter the obstacles that came my way. I found similar challenges during my computer science class, but I used the same strategies that I used during my GripTape Challenge in order to overcome learning blocks.”

“One of the biggest changes I’ve seen is that now she is capable of being in control... I feel like she was given this blank canvas ... this project was truly her own, it gave her confidence and creativity.”

89% GRIP TAPE INCREASED MY OVERALL SELF-CONFIDENCE THAT I CAN ACCOMPLISH SOMETHING IF I WORK HARD.

100% PARTICIPATING IN GRIP TAPE STRENGTHENED MY BELIEF THAT I CAN SUCCESSFULLY DRIVE MY OWN LEARNING.

95% PARTICIPATING IN THE GRIP TAPE CHALLENGE HELPED ME FEEL THAT OVERALL I KNOW HOW TO SUCCESSFULLY APPROACH A LEARNING EXPERIENCE IN A WAY THAT WILL ALLOW ME TO ACHIEVE MOST OR ALL OF MY GOALS.

Of all the outcomes that GripTape youth experience—from a clearer sense of direction to more active pursuit of their interests—confidence may be the most foundational. In fact, youth and adults alike report that other changes in mindsets and behaviors are first and foremost made possible because of the self-confidence gained through GripTape.
OWNERSHIP IS TO CONFIDENCE AS PEANUT BUTTER IS TO JELLY

One especially striking finding was that youth’s newfound confidence shone through in how they embraced independence and autonomy. Every young person interviewed stated that they now feel in control and have greater ownership of their learning. One youth shared how during his Challenge he was hitting dead ends in certain roads of his research. He realized he had the power to go down a different path and no one else was going to do it for him. When he finished he said, “That was the product of work in my life I have been the most proud of.”

Confidence and a sense of control appear to work in tandem to drive a host of productive shifts in mindsets and behaviors. Through GripTape, youth are accomplishing things they never thought possible—opening their eyes to what they’re capable of learning, and instilling in them a sense that when they put their mind to it, they can complete anything.

HOW DOES A PURPOSEFUL DIRECTION EMERGE?

How do you figure out what your true interests are?

For most of us, there’s no substitute for experience. It is key to determining whether we choose, and stay, on a certain path or decide to change direction. Many young people, however, follow the course set for them at home and in school. They often don’t gain authentic experiences with new fields of study and potential careers until late in college, an internship, or a new job. What opportunities do young people have to try different directions—before they invest significant time and resources into a path that doesn’t hold their interest and light up their minds and hearts?

Young people and adults report that, through GripTape, youth have a clearer or transformed sense of the interests and directions that they want to pursue in their lives. Youth described an awakening of their passions and interests, and a greater sense of the freedom and ability to pursue these passions.
"My Learning Challenge centered on a trip to Montgomery, Alabama to visit the Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration. The South is a different ecosystem from the one I grew up in... my learning journey encouraged me to declare a concentration in African Studies, to better understand the global economic impact of the slave trade I learned so much about at the Legacy Museum."

TURNING A “FALSE” START INTO A PRODUCTIVE DIRECTION

For many youth, firsthand ownership and pursuit of their topics of interest led them to change direction in their course of study or career aspiration. Six in 10 young people noted there were times during the journey when they had to change direction or modify one of their activities or goals.

Some youth shifted their focus within a field. For example, one young person switched from coding to computer design, saying, “The coding put me to sleep.” Others ruled out a specific field altogether: One Challenger shared that when she started GripTape, she had thought she would pursue psychology in college. But once she dove into her Learning Challenge, she realized the subject wasn’t something that she enjoyed.

It appears that the Learning Challenge has provided young people with a way to test the waters for a learning or career path that they were interested in. What potential does this kind of experience have for helping youth determine, and sometimes change, their direction—and help avoid the lost time or delayed starts that so many experience as young adults? These “false starts” can be costly: For example, one-third of first-time college students change their major within three years1, often with significant financial and emotional ramifications. What opportunities can help youth explore their interests and gain a clearer (if not perfect) sense of direction for their future endeavors?

ARE YOU FORCE-FEEDING LEARNING?

Have you ever seen young people take complete control of their learning paths?

We have. And when they do, they’re exponentially boosting their learning later on. The ways young people are actively taking ownership over their learning have been astonishing. Youth (and adults in their lives) consistently say that GripTape planted a desire for learning that translates into action, often by youth inventing opportunities for themselves. Months and years after their experience with GripTape, young people are demonstrating the newfound confidence, self-determined direction, and skills to effectively invent and pursue new opportunities to learn. Youth programs and researchers typically don’t study what happens when young people control and create their own learning paths—but we think the field should.

Young people’s experience with GripTape has transformed their understanding of how learning opportunities match their interests and goals. And the vast majority have now gained confidence and assumed responsibility over creating new opportunities for their learning.

“Before GripTape I always just followed school... I never asked about what I was being asked to do... just school, school, school, school. GripTape has opened [my] eyes more to the fact that I have full control over what I want to learn and what I want to learn in life... I am really self-motivated now and I am all for learning new things on my own rather than waiting for people to tell me or give me the opportunity.”

GRIPTAPE CHALLENGER

98% INCREASED THEIR MOTIVATION TO GET MORE INVOLVED IN MAKING SURE THEIR LEARNING EXPERIENCES MATCH THEIR INTERESTS.

94% REPORTED THEY FEEL IT IS UP TO THEM TO TAKE AN ACTIVE ROLE IN CREATING NEW LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES THAT MATCH THEIR INTERESTS AND THEY FEEL CONFIDENT ENOUGH TO DO SO.

88% REPORTED THAT SINCE GRIPTAPE THEY HAVE PROACTIVELY WORKED WITH ADULTS IN OR OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL TO CREATE NEW OPPORTUNITIES THAT BETTER MATCH WHAT OR HOW THEY WANT TO LEARN.

PARENT STORIES

One mother shared that her daughter gave a presentation at an entrepreneurship conference stemming from her GripTape project. She created a new marketing opportunity for the business she had started, making connections and finding new merchandising and contacts at the conference.

Another mother described how her daughter started a diversity and equity club in her high school as part of GripTape, and has since created new opportunities, including a sister equity club at the elementary school.
Youth gave many examples of ways they have created learning opportunities. They’re teaching themselves new skills like guitar, language, religion, dance, and photography, and proactively creating relationships with adult mentors in various fields. One student recounted that she wanted to have experience in a law office. Rather than setting up an appointment with her guidance counselor and searching for internship opportunities online, she instead brought her resume to a law office and started a conversation. As a result, she entered into an internship and is finishing it now.

Young people are also taking action to ignite their peers in the way that GripTape did for them. One young person explained how after her Challenge, she gained a more advanced interest in computer science, and with her computer science teacher, created a Girls Who Code club in her school.

Still other youth described recognizing the limitations in what was available to them in school and other traditional learning experiences—yet also described feeling empowered and “ignited” to take action to improve their opportunities both inside and outside of school.

Time and again, we’re seeing how powerful the results can really be when youth experience ownership and direction—often for the first time in their lives—over their learning. What are the ways that you can provide that spark and inspiration for learning?

A CLOSING THOUGHT...

By now, we’ve all heard the alarm bells that our children are moving into an uncharted future.

Technology is transforming the world of work. Some experts suggest that most of the jobs today’s students will be doing don’t even exist yet. Others are even predicting a “job-less” future—one that will require flexibility and passion to forge a career.

How do we prepare youth for a future that’s this hard to envision? This is a question that must be tackled on all fronts, as many of you are now doing. We believe an essential part of the answer is equipping youth to lead lives full of agency: to see a world full of possibilities, and choose and construct their path forward with intention. And to do so, we need to provide them with opportunities to build the mindsets, skills, and behaviors that allow them to experience, and keep practicing, agency. Opportunities to develop and deepen their confidence and drive for learning, the skills to manage themselves as they do so, and the active ownership over shaping and creating their learning paths. How can we foster these opportunities for young people—and get out of their way so they can show themselves, and us, how far they can go?

“IF WE WANT KIDS TO DO THINGS IN THE REAL WORLD, WE HAVE TO LET THEM DO THINGS IN THE REAL WORLD.”

GripTape Challenger

READY TO JOIN US?

Each and every day, GripTape is giving young people the traction they need to take control of their own learning, choose their purposes, and achieve their full potential. Does this mission light up your mind, stir something in your heart? Join us! From young people, to volunteers, to partners and staff, we are an energetic and passionate team. Are you a funder, a researcher, someone who is inspired to ignite the interests and passions of our youth? Join our effort. We want to hear from you, right here—info@griptape.org

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