The USAID Liberia Advancing Youth Project provides increased access to quality alternative basic education (ABE) classes, social and leadership development opportunities, and livelihoods skills training for out-of-school youth, ages 13 to 35, with marginal literacy and numeracy skills. Project activities support the continued growth of economic opportunity through work-based learning and an emphasis on clubs and local alliances to support education and livelihood development of youth. The Advancing Youth Learning Agenda focuses on research questions that have arisen during project implementation, enabling the exploration of the effectiveness and sustainability of the integrated learning, leadership, and livelihoods model.

INTRODUCTION

In order to learn how youth are faring after they graduate from ABE Level 3, the USAID Liberia Advancing Youth Project (Advancing Youth) implemented a tracer study with learners who graduated from the program by June 2015. Advancing Youth sought to understand how easy or difficult graduates found the transition from an ABE program into formal education or employment sectors, as well as what challenges or support mechanisms were key during this transition. Thus, the following research questions served as a guide for the study:

What percent of Level 3 graduates have transitioned to the formal education system or to employment opportunities consistent with their self-identified goals?

What societal, social, and personal factors do learners perceive to positively or negatively affect their ability to achieve these goals?

These two research questions guided our inquiry into learners’ lives approximately six months after their successful completion of ABE Level 3. The research team sought to document youth’s education or employment outcomes and to understand whether or not they achieved the goals they had set for themselves at completion testing. In addition, Advancing Youth sought a deeper understanding of why learners did or did not achieve—or perceive themselves to have achieved or not achieved—these goals.
METHODOLOGY
This tracer study makes use of a nonexperimental, posttest-only design with Advancing Youth learners who have graduated from the program by passing completion testing at the end of Level 3 of the ABE curriculum. The study uses quantitative data collected through a survey designed and implemented by the Advancing Youth research team. Data was collected after the beginning of the second semester of the academic year, which was at least six months after the most recent cohort of Level 3 learners had graduated from Level 3. This timing allowed the most recent graduates the time to establish themselves in further education or in employment. Advancing Youth staff met with the graduates and conducted a face-to-face survey with each graduate, entering data directly onto tablets.

KEY FINDINGS
The study traced learners’ goals and incidence of achieving these goals at least six months after graduation. It also addressed learners’ successes, the obstacles that impede learner goals, and the types of support learners use to help themselves along the way. ABE graduates identified three main goals that they wanted to pursue post-ABE—trade school/technical and vocational education and training (TVET) (40.8%), business (27.4%), and formal education (25.1%).

Of the 179 youth who participated in the study, 26% were successful in achieving their goals while 74% were not. The most common pursuit for successful learners was to go into business for themselves; almost half (49%) of these learners chose this path. Nearly a quarter of successful youth were able to continue formal education in either day school (19%) or night school (4%). This statistic reinforces the finding that although continuing formal education was a goal for learners, it was not attainable for many successful ABE graduates. However, among successful ABE graduates, 49% of learners reported that they would like to pursue further education in the future (see Figure 1).

Skills training, pursued by 16% of successful learners, was also an important goal. Learners successfully participated in TVET (6%), Advancing Youth Project job training (2%), and formal (2%) and informal (6%) apprenticeships. The desire to continue to learn new skills and abilities was important for successful graduates—39% of successful graduates are continuing either their formal education or skills-based training.

1 Successful youth are defined as youth who achieved the goal they set for themselves for what they wanted to do after completion of Advancing Youth’s ABE program.

An examination of the current vocations of ABE graduates who did not achieve their goals reveals that the largest proportion of learners were farming (43.2%), doing nothing (28%), or engaged in business activities (15.9%). Very few learners were working for others (7.6%), continuing formal education (2.3%), or in skills training (3%). Incidence of returning to any kind of education was low in this group (see Figure 2).

Of those who did not achieve their goals, 65.4% had wanted to continue learning—in particular they were interested in additional skills-based training (48.8)—but were not successful. If successful and unsuccessful learner groups are considered together, the majority of learners wanted to continue their education (58.2%).

From analyzing both successful and unsuccessful ABE graduates, a definition of success for these students begins to emerge. Successful learners prioritized self-employment (49%), formal education (23%), and skills training (16%). These three categories were among the least frequent responses for unsuccessful learners. Similarly, the inverse is true in that farming and doing nothing accounted for 70% of unsuccessful learner occupations (see Figure 3).

Farming was not seen as the occupation of a successful ABE graduate. The Advancing Youth’s 2012 Labor Market Assessment (LMA) found that youth view traditional agriculture as laborious work with little room for advancement. As a result of this perception, Liberian
youth do not deem agricultural activities as having high status or being a respectable vocation. This finding points to the need to continue to educate Liberian youth on the opportunities available to them in the agricultural field.

These same trends in defining success are evident when successful learners were asked to select future goals for themselves. When asked if they believed they could still achieve more than they already had, learners who achieved their initial goal expressed overwhelming hope for the future, with no learners indicating that they did not believe they could achieve more. The majority (78.7%) of successful learners, in fact, expressed that they believed they could achieve much more than they had already, with the rest indicating that they felt they could achieve a little more.

The most popular future goal among learners who achieved their goals was to attain a Senior High School (SHS) diploma (29.8%), followed by a certificate/diploma in TVET (19.1%) and pursuit of a college education (15%). When combined, these results mean that 49% of learners who were successful want to pursue additional formal education. These figures highlight a further distinction within the study population. Unsuccessful learners’ primary goals were trade school/TVET (48.8%) and business (19.7%), whereas successful learners are focused on formal education (49%) in the future. Successful learners are more interested in acquiring additional formal education whereas unsuccessful learners are more focused on generating income.

All of the ABE graduates surveyed in this study reported challenges that constrained their post-graduation opportunities. Personal matters were reported as the primary obstacle to achieving their goals, and within the category of personal matters, financial challenges (82%) were overwhelmingly the chief concern. The 102 learners who met financial difficulties believe that removing these financial obstacles would greatly improve their odds for achieving their post-graduation goals (see Figure 4).

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Through implementation of an integrated learning, livelihoods, and leadership model, the Advancing Youth project provided opportunities for Liberian youth to address some of the personal and contextual constraints that affect their chances of success. Both youth who did and did not achieve their goals faced similar personal, familial, and community challenges. Some of these youth were able to push through these challenges—perhaps with the support of family, but often without this support—to achieve their goals. While this study does not fully answer the question as to why some Advancing Youth learners did achieve their goals and some did
From analyzing both successful and unsuccessful ABE graduates, a definition of success for these students begins to emerge. Successful learners prioritized self-employment (49%), formal education (23%), and skills training (16%).

not, it highlights key areas for future research, including the psychosocial and societal factors that influence youth’s success and definition of their goals.

A majority of the youth in this study did not achieve their goals (74%). Within this group, the majority of ABE graduates were unable to access technical and/or livelihood skills training and vocational education or start a business. This study’s post-graduate learner findings have informed the following recommendations:

1) Almost half of all learners (40.8%) wanted to gain additional skills training. However, only 6.7% of learners were able to actually pursue skills training.

Recommendation: Vocational education policies and their implementation need to take into account the availability of and ease of access to technical and vocational skills training programs. Accessibility includes making vocational training available for those who have less than a 9th-grade equivalent education. Improving access and linking vocational training to private sector demands may increase the possibility of learners being employed on completion of such training.

2) All learners in this survey confronted challenges after graduation; financial constraints were the most pressing challenge for the vast majority of those surveyed. (These learners graduated before Advancing Youth started implementing Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLA) with ABE learners.)

Recommendation: ABE graduates need to have increased access to financial services. The ability to save and have access to credit has the potential to improve their business and educational prospects. One possible solution may be providing youth with access to a microfinancing mechanism, such as a Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) program, that may aid many of these learners in achieving their goals.

3) Although formal education (day or night school) was not pursued by many learners in the sample, continuing education was a goal for a majority of learners. This finding implies that continuing education, broadly understood, is a desired outcome for Liberian youth that ABE-implementing programs must more adequately address.

Recommendation: ABE programs need to provide transitional assistance to their learners. Advising services would help learners understand their post-graduation options and better prepare them for continuing their education and/or entering the workforce.

References