



# The Bristol Hub Teen Center

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Prepared by CDAE 3710: Local Community Initiatives | Fall 2023  
Department of Community Development and Applied Economics  
University of Vermont

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## About this Report:

This brief report presents insights captured by the students of CDAE 3710: Local Community Initiatives taught by Kelly Hamshaw, Senior Lecturer from the Department of Community Development & Applied Economics (CDAE) at the University of Vermont as a part of a semester-long service-learning project. The team sought to answer the following questions to learn more about the role of the Hub in the greater Bristol community and the experiences of the teens who are a part of the Hub:

1. What does the Hub mean to the teens? How is it perceived?
2. What do the teens do when they are at the Hub?
3. What is the best way to share information with local teens?
4. What challenges, barriers, and concerns do teens have to navigate to participate at the Hub?
5. What could be improved at the Hub?

## The Bristol Hub Teen Center:

The Bristol Hub Teen Center (fondly called the Hub) is a non-profit teen center that serves youth aged 12-19 who live in the communities that comprise the “Five Towns” of Bristol, Lincoln Monkton, New Haven, and Starksboro in northeastern Addison County. The Hub has a physical location on the grounds of the Bristol Recreation Club and located adjacent to the regional public high school, Mount Abraham Union High School. The Hub provides local youth with, “a safe, supervised, substance-free environment when school is not in session” and offers a variety of activities, ranging from music and visual arts to simply using the space for socializing with peers or studying. The Hub offers access to resources and programs that contribute to the overall health and wellbeing of youth in the greater community. There are a variety of local, regional, and state partners that support the Hub through grant funding and other types of programmatic support.

There have been 280 individuals who have visited the Hub since January 2023. In the past five years, the number of individuals visiting the Hub has been increasing, with a big jump post Covid. Before 2020 there were around 170 unique visitors to the Hub annually. During the 2021-2022 academic year the number of visitors increased to 218, and during the 2022-2023 academic year it increased even further to 247. This upward trend of unique individuals shows that the Hub is growing in popularity and more people are recognizing it as a great resource for teens. When looking at the breakdown of gender, the Hub is used mostly by males. For 2022, 65% of the total users were male, 20% were female, and 15% were non-binary. 52% of users are residents of Bristol while the rest are from one of the other towns in the five-town area. Additionally, 3% of the visitors were from Middlebury. The distribution of visitors by age is a right-tailed curve with more of the teens being around the younger ages than older. The mode age is 14 with 58 unique users.

The Hub is led by Director Taylor Welch-Plante and two staff members, Zac Farnham-Haskell (Hub Coordinator) and Jackie Steponaitis (Program Assistant). The Hub operates at 10 Airport Drive, Bristol, VT 05443. It is open from 2:45-6:00 PM on weekdays during the school year and 3:00-6:00 PM during the summer with additional special hours as needed. It also has recently partnered with the Mount Abraham Union School District's Expanded Learning Program (ELP) to offer extended evening hours on designated days during the 2023-2024 academic year.

### **About Our Approach:**

To begin our evaluation of the Hub we needed to first gather an understanding of the Hub and what it's about. This was done by reviewing secondary data compiled by Hub leadership. The data compiled gave us insight into how many teens visit the Hub and demographics of who was attending the Hub—including gender, hometown, and age. We also learned about what happens at the Hub, activities available to the teens, and partnerships in the community. To bring this information to life, the class took a trip to the Hub for a site visit. Here we got a hands-on experience of what the Hub is like for the teens. We played with the VR headsets, videogame consoles, and air hockey table, all hot commodities. We also had an opportunity to speak with a few teens who were there to share about their experiences at the Hub.

We then went back a second time to host conversations in smaller groups with the teens. We went earlier to be at the Hub at peak time to ensure we spoke to as many teens as possible. We asked the teens questions about their favorite activities at the Hub, their first memories, what the Hub means to them, how they first learned about the Hub, and more. These informal conversations were a great way to see the Hub through the teens' eyes and learn about their experiences. To make them comfortable in the interviews, we used the method of "meeting them where they are at" suggested by Taylor. We went up to the teens at their chosen activities and asked them questions as they continued doing whatever they were doing. We gained a lot of valuable insights from these conversations.

Many teens shared that they wouldn't change a single thing about the Hub. They felt very safe and respected there and knew if they needed anything they could go to the staff for help. Many also expressed their love for the skate park and the associated equipment. Some changes suggested were to rehab the skate park, adding more tangible items for activities, and more opportunity-based activities for teens to learn new skills. Many of the teens use the Hub as a place to hang out in between sports, wait for their ride home, or just chill with friends.

It is important to note that there are some key limitations that should be considered with this report. Namely, the short timeframe of this project limited the ability to engage with teens who do not currently visit the Hub. Future work could focus on engaging teens who haven't yet visited the Hub to learn more about their perspectives and learn more about potential challenges these teens may face in using the Hub.

## **Key Insights:**

This section presents insights shared by the participating teens organized by key question. Overall, these conversations yielded valuable information the teens' experiences at the Hub that can be used to reflect on its role within the greater community.

### *Key Question #1 – What does the Hub mean to the teens?*

When taking your first step into the Hub you are gently hit with the magnitude of possibility that exists in the space. You feel an odd sense of belonging and community, even if you have never visited before. Virtually anything a teenager would want to spend their afternoon doing is available to them. However, we wanted to get deeper than what was clear to the eye. We wanted to see what the Hub really means to the teens who use it. While the Hub has an individual significance for each of the teens we spoke to, we can separate the meanings discussed into two categories; the physical space of the Hub and the way that the teens feel in the space.

Words often repeated in conversations with several teens describing the Hub included “safe,” “comfortable,” and “supportive.” These same conversations illustrated how the teens feel like they have ownership of this space – they can make it their own and belong in the space. This is a special and unique function of the Hub; a space where teens can be safely independent is deeply beneficial for their growth. It also shows how important having a space built for teenagers by teenagers is to the teens themselves. When asked to use three words to describe the Hub, one student described it as “fun, interesting, and inclusive.” Every identity and background are welcomed and actively made to belong at the Hub, a feature obvious to the teens and the interviewers who were brand new to the space alike.

The physical space at the Hub is a bright, welcoming one with many different activities that teens have access to. Many of these resources are not available to all teens at home. One teen was particularly excited about the sewing machine and showed the interviewer pictures of different cloaks they had made at the Hub. When this teen was asked about how they found out about the sewing machine, they said they had asked Taylor, the director, for more sewing supplies. This was a common theme - if the youth asked Taylor for something that they felt would make their time better, it would almost always be supplied. Multiple teens talked about how the video games and the food offered were big drivers in their use of the Hub. The Hub's location next to the skate park also brings teens into the space. It is a big draw and the reason that a large percentage of the teens come to the Hub. Some teens learn new skills like rollerblading or skating at the skate park; others “show off mad skills” that they have honed at the skate park. From the way that teens spoke about the skate park, it is a space of freedom and self-expression.

While the multitude of activities that are provided for the teens are well liked and well used, many of the teens use the Hub as a place to feel okay doing nothing at all. The Hub is “a place to go when there's nothing else to do” and a place to “chill” or “hang out.” While this may seem insignificant to some adults, and maybe even unproductive, feeling comfortable while doing nothing is crucial for many teenagers. High school, family life, and growing up are stressful. The feeling that your whole life is controlled by other people can be crushing at times. Unwinding, especially after school, can be very important to teen health and happiness. The Hub offers teens a safe space to do nothing, while simultaneously keeping them safe, lightly supervised, out of trouble, social, and comfortable.

### *Key Question #2 – What do the teens do when they are at the Hub?*

To fully appreciate the impact of the Hub, learning about how teens use the resources and space at the Hub is informative for program leaders and community members. They have opportunities varying from physical activities, creative endeavors, technology, and social settings.

Many teens mentioned their love for the skatepark. They were often seen dropping their backpacks off and immediately picking up scooters, roller blades, and skateboards to use on the grounds of the Hub. On days that the skatepark is closed or the weather may be uncondusive for enjoying the outdoors, many students at the Hub will look for an activity to try indoors. Arts and crafts are a major attraction for the teens who may not find joy in playing video games or virtual reality. A seventh-grade student said, “My favorite thing to do at the Hub is make slime with friends”. Other options for teens looking to express creativity at the Hub include shaping clay, painting, or even learning to sew. By offering these options for arts and crafts it allows for teens to explore their creative side and potentially pick up a hobby they become passionate about.

For teens not interested in arts and crafts, there is a plethora of options for other indoor activities. A unique offering to these students is the full instrumental band set-up in the corner of the Hub. While it is not the most popular activity, one of the teens mentioned, “every once in a while, someone will try their hand on the drum set.” And if none of that is a student's first choice, there is a great lineup of computers for them to browse, play games on, or use to complete a homework assignment. A 14-year-old teen explained if the weather does not permit him to use the skatepark on any given day, he can “always find a quiet corner in the Hub to get some homework done.”

Another important facet of the Hub that teens raved about is the cooking and snacks that are provided for them. While it is common for a member of the Hub to enjoy something made by Taylor or one of the adults present, they are encouraged to try and make something themselves. While it was not obvious from the data collected that the teens take it upon themselves to cook, there was some emphasis on the Hub providing skilled-based learning opportunities in which teens would learn how to properly create a meal. When they are not partaking in a snack or talking amongst themselves, a lot of the focus seems to be around video games, especially Virtual Reality. Whether it is playing Minecraft on the Xbox or competing against a friend in Super Smash Bros, many of the teens are drawn to these pastimes which provide them with a temporary escape.

On a sunny day the skatepark provides these teens with hours of tireless fun. Offering a plethora of scooters, which seems to be a crowd favorite, the Hub’s outdoor experience revolves around this central block of concrete. Chill, a Burton-owned mission-based program, offers valuable programming for teens through skateboarding and scootering lessons once a week in the fall. It is clear the skatepark is indispensable for many of the youth in the community who attend the Hub, especially for those who need to be active in a safe space.

The Hub also is a place for teens to meet their friends, socialize, do their homework. The Hub is unique in that it provides a third place for teens to socialize freely. Many teens may struggle during these years of life and having an opportunity to engage with peers is vital to developing social skills and deepening relationships. Living in a more rural setting can be a barrier for seeing classmates and hanging out with friends outside of school hours. At the Hub, teens are free to enjoy themselves, build connections, and many teens come here to do just that.

### *Key Question #3: How do teens learn about the Hub? What are the best methods to reach the teens?*

Understanding how teens learn about the Hub is essential to inform how the Hub leadership team can share information about the variety of events and activities that the Hub can offer. This information can guide the Hub

in understand and working to improve its outreach methods and to ensure that more local teens are aware of its services and activities. Knowing where teens hear about the Hub can help the teen center allocate its resources more accordingly and effectively. If certain channels are particularly successful, the Hub can focus on enhancing its presence in those areas. It can also identify areas where the Hub could improve outreach efforts. Based on conversations with teens, it became evident that there are three primary avenues through which they become aware of the Bristol Hub Teen Center:

1. **Word of mouth:** The teenagers reported that one of the prevalent means of learning about the Hub is through interpersonal communication. Specifically, they receive information from their parents, siblings, and peers, who play a significant role in introducing them to the Hub's existence and activities.
2. **Physical Proximity to Mt. Abraham Union High School:** Another notable pathway is by serendipitous discovery during activities in proximity to the Hub's location. Teens recounted instances where they learned about the Hub by physically encountering it while engaging in recreational pursuits in the surrounding areas of the high school and Bristol Recreation Department facilities.
3. **Communication from Mt. Abraham Union High School:** A substantial number of teen indicated that their awareness of the Hub is facilitated through school-related communication channels. This includes announcements made within the school premises, information disseminated through school newsletters, and engagement with the Hub's representatives during school events through activities such as tabling. This is of interesting note as there seems to be some lack of clarity about the relationship between the school and the Hub. Discovering more regarding these school-related communication channels and how they came to be might provide some clarity regarding the relationship and create space to further it.

It is also worth noting that a smaller subset of the teens also emphasized their active participation in following the Hub on social media platforms by Instagram and, to a lesser extent, Facebook. Some also mentioned that their parents follow these channels and will share updates with them. This proactive engagement serves to keep them informed about the events and developments associated with the Hub.

#### *Question 4: What challenges, barriers, and concerns do teens have to navigate to participate at the Hub?*

This section shares some teens shared about challenges and barriers teens say they face when spending time at the Hub. While we are discussing some examples here, it is important to note that we did not have time to have conversations with teens not involved with the Hub to see why they were not participating. Future efforts to engage these teens in such conversations could be especially helpful in understanding their challenges, barriers, and concerns with being part of the Hub community. We would also like to say that when talking to the teens at the Hub many could not think of a barrier, challenges, or concern they had about the Hub.

The primary challenge mentioned by teens was balancing their schedules with their time spent at the Hub. Teens at the Hub spoke of the difficulties they have participating at the Hub when they have things like athletics, homework, and jobs. Various teens talked about activities such as extracurriculars and work often conflicting with the times the Hub is open. Several teens stated that they would love to visit the Hub more often if there were extended hours and could come after work, sporting events, and other extracurriculars. Several teens mentioned that transportation barriers are negatively impacting their ability to access the Hub. Some teens

talked about how they felt like they had no way to get home as the Hub was not open long enough for someone to pick them up. Overall, many teens believe that extending the hours of operation would solve the schedule and transportation issues. This change would allow more teens to be able to access and participate at the Hub.

We would also like to note in this section that some people in the community have a negative connotation of the Hub and that this could be a challenge when asking for funding from the community, and convincing parents to let their children come. We think interviewing other members in the community could also help us to understand what information is lacking when it comes to these community members.

#### *Key Question #5: What could be improved at the Hub?*

The Hub has many aspects that the teens value as things are currently are and shared that they do not want to change. These aspects that the teens at the Hub enjoy and participate in are what increase the value of the space. When the teens were given a voice to speak about what they would add to the Hub, or do to further improve the space, many of their responses revolved around enhancements to the skate park, tangible activities, opportunities for activities within their community, development-based activities, and improvement of the Hub space and extended hours. It is notable that when students were asked about desired improvements to The Hub, they had no requests and were overwhelmingly happy and quite satisfied with the physical space and resources that were offered.

The skate park has been around for a long time and has faced substantial wear and tear, and this is something the teens notice. It is already something that Hub staff are aware of and are ready to change. Some of these improvements to the skate park that the teens had in mind are adding smaller and safer ramps for those who are new to the skate park, picking up the trash to clean-up the area, and an overall revamp of the park. Another improvement that the teens want to see is for there to be an increased availability of skateboards, scooters, and skates, and in multiple sizes. This would allow more teens to participate.

Another area for improvement at the Hub that the teens expressed was including more discrete activities for the youth to explore. A banjo, fidget toys, as well as a 3D printer are some of the items that the teens feel are missing among the activities at the Hub. But also, the opportunity for having pool access through the Hub and more outdoor activities was expressed by multiple teens as well. Along with outdoor activities one teen had the idea to have a picnic table outside to encourage teens to be outside more often. A final idea of a tangible activity that the teens voiced was that a ping pong table would be a nice addition to the games within the Hub.

Aside from activities that the teens could simply pick up and enjoy while in the Hub, many teens also expressed the want for opportunity-based activities. These are types of activities that the Hub could provide the teens to learn something in a group setting, or to get involved with their community. King Arthur offers take home baking kits that would be an opportunity for the teens to learn how to bake in their homes but be provided resources through the Hub and be able to connect with the community. With this idea, cooking class opportunities within the Hub are also something that the teens would like to see as well. Within the community, the teens also want to be connected to animals and either be able to learn how to take care of animals or get the opportunity to go and visit some animals. Specifically, there are many responses that suggest trail riding activity would be popular. A final aspect of opportunity-based activities the teens felt that they were missing at the Hub was the ability to have peer led workshops in life skills, for example changing a tire. Peer-led workshops could encourage the teens to demonstrate leadership, as well as learn important life skills.

The final aspect of improvements that the teens suggested were improvements to the space itself. An increase in the space available and making it more of an indoor and outdoor space was voiced often. Teens also vouched for extended hours, specifically during the lunch hours of the school. Despite the extensive décor in the Hub, the youth articulated they want even more. This makes the importance of the “organized chaos” the Hub provides to be key in the teen experience at the Hub. An improvement that would change the administrative dynamic of the Hub more is that teens want there to be more “invitations.” This means that they want there to be kitchen rules in the kitchen so that they feel it is okay to use the materials and take the food when they feel called to. Having an invitation also means the Hub staff making sure that newer teens to the Hub are familiar with the space and comfortable using all of the resources.

## Reflection & Conclusion

This report provides a summary of the conversations our class was fortunate to have with the teens who use the Hub. From these conversations, we learned that the Hub provides local teens with a safe, inclusive, and welcoming to space. They use this space in a variety of ways – from a place to do their homework and socialize with their peers to pursuing creative endeavors or develop essential life skills. There is no shortage of things to do while at the Hub as it offers teens a skate park (slated for physical improvements in 2024), musical instruments, video games, air hockey, and many more activities. Most recently, the Hub was able to secure a vehicle to be able to transport teens off-site for field trips. The Hub staff have actively cultivated an atmosphere of respect, inclusion, and autonomy where teens feel able to be themselves. Our class greatly enjoyed the opportunities we had throughout the semester to engage with the Hub staff and the teens who make this special place such a valuable asset for the greater Bristol community.

### For more information about this project, please contact:

Taylor Welch-Plante, Director  
Bristol Hub Teen Center  
[hubdirector@bristolvt.org](mailto:hubdirector@bristolvt.org)

Kelly Hamshaw, Senior Lecturer  
Dept. of Community Development &  
Applied Economics  
[Kelly.Hamshaw@uvm.edu](mailto:Kelly.Hamshaw@uvm.edu)



*This report was prepared by: Jillian Bluestein, Phoebe Briney, Sean Cole, Reid Corliss, Rachel Cunningham, Rachael Dochinger, Mac Gaither, Samantha Grant, Leah Isayev, Camille Jacoby, Paige Kincaid, Autumn King, Olivia Miller, Audrey Nadeau, Silvan Padberg, Callie Robbins, and Anna Belle Warren.*

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