Strategies for 4-H Youth Development Educators on Outreach Programming

The Need for 4-H Youth Development Program Outreach

Youth, families, and communities need access to community resources that offer high quality youth development experiences. In their *America After 3 Report,* the Afterschool Alliance (2009) shares that nationally the number of children in grades K-12 who are unsupervised in the afternoons has risen from 14.3 million (25%) in 2004, to 15.1 million (26%) in 2009. This report also shared that the parents of 18 million children would enroll their kids in afterschool programs if programs were available. The need for quality youth development programs during the out-of-school hours exists in all communities-- urban, suburban, and rural. However, there are distinct barriers to accessing quality youth development programs in all communities. Some barriers include transportation, staff turnover, low program participation, and funding.

The 4-H Youth Development program has the unique ability to meet these needs and help alleviate some of the barriers within communities. 4-H has a rich history of reaching diverse youth and communities with high-quality programming. Although 4-H has more traditionally served youth in rural communities with a distinct focus on agriculture and animal science, 4-H has since expanded to deliver quality experiential learning opportunities categorized under three National 4-H mission mandates:

- Science
- Healthy Living
- Citizenship

These program areas have successfully been delivered in diverse communities throughout the country. However, there are still untapped communities and underserved youth who can benefit from the 4-H Youth Development program.

There are many delivery modes within 4-H that provide youth with quality youth development experiences. These delivery modes include but are not limited to (1) community clubs, (2) after-school programs, (3) school enrichment, and (4) camps. The variety in program delivery modes allow for flexibility in programming to best serve and meet the needs of youth in diverse communities.

There are a number of key strategies to successfully expand and sustain 4-H outreach programs. These strategies include (1) assessment and planning, (2) quality youth development training for facilitators, (3) participant recruitment, (4) quality program delivery, (5) sustainable partnerships, and (6) evaluation. This fact sheet will provide an overview of these six strategies and resources to begin your 4-H program outreach.

Assessment and Planning

All quality youth development outreach programs should begin by conducting a community needs assessment to effectively plan a program that meets the needs of a community. A needs assessment allows you to identify a target audience and community as well as the appropriate 4-H research-based programs that will best serve the interest and needs of the audience. Once a target community is identified, it is important to build community partnerships with organizations that can foster and sustain a youth development program.

Key Elements of Assessment and Planning

- A needs assessment can be used to identify underserved communities and a target audience. To find an example of how to get started with your needs assessment and planning, review the *4-H Youth Development Programming in Underserved Communities* guide (Junge, 2006).

- Once a community is identified, you should assess your target audience to better understand the needs and interests of your potential participants. This can be done in several ways, such as focus groups and questionnaires. Contact the Baltimore County Public Library to check out the Baltimore County Public Library Youth Services Division's (2006) *After School Youth Programming: An Opportunity for Growth* for an example of youth questionnaires.

- Build relationships with local organizations in the community. Collaborative partnerships are essential to building sustainable quality youth development programs. Some examples may include libraries, Police Athletic Leagues (PAL), YMCA, FFA, Farm Bureau, and other local youth centers.

- Identify potential funding sources that support your program goals. Some examples may include your local management board, Farm Bureau, JC Penny Afterschool Fund, service clubs such as Optimists Clubs, and local foundations.

- Identify and/or develop research-based educational curricula to address the needs and interests of your target audience.

- Identify program goals and objectives, plan an annual program calendar and develop supportive evaluation tools to assess the program outcomes and impacts.

Quality Youth Development Training for Facilitators

The 4-H Youth Development program has a long history of successfully utilizing adult volunteers to deliver programs that meet the needs of youth. In addition to utilizing the skills of our adult volunteers, 4-H has also trained and developed the youth development facilitation skills of college interns and other youth development practitioners. Volunteers, college interns, and youth development practitioners (1) multiply the efforts of paid Educators and staff, (2) bring diversity and creativity to an organization, and (3) meet the needs of youth in communities. Training and professional development opportunities are essential to adequately prepare adult volunteers, college interns, and youth development practitioners to deliver quality 4-H outreach programming.

Key Elements of Quality Youth Development Training for Facilitators

- Recruiting volunteers from the community can lead to a program's sustainability as there is a direct investment in the success of the program and community.

- It is important for college interns and youth development practitioners to continue to develop their real-world work experience and/or professional development opportunities.

- Quality youth development training should include:
  - Organizational overview
  - Risk management, child abuse/neglect, universal precautions
  - Positive youth development best practices
  - Outreach program structure and management
  - Facilitation of research-based curricula

For specific examples, consider the *University of Maryland Extension (UME) Volunteer Policy* (Tabler, Dennis, Gordon, Pahlman, & Rhodes, 2010), *Tools of the Trade: Giving Kids a Lifetime Guarantee* (Reilly, Junge, Manglallan, & Killian, 2008), and the *National 4-H Headquarters Essential Elements* (Martz, Mincemoyer, & McNeely, 2009).

- Remember that training and professional development is on-going as the needs of young people and communities are constantly evolving. Be prepared to provide on-going support for volunteers, college interns, and youth development practitioners.

Participant Recruitment

An ideal situation for initiating a new 4-H outreach program is to meet the youth where they are. 4-H has the ability to successfully partner with organizations that already serve youth. 4-H can enhance existing youth programs by providing (1) training for staff; (2) support for volunteer recruitment and training; (3) research based curricula; (4) resources from the land-grant university; and (5) additional county, state, and national youth development opportunities.

Key Elements of Participant Recruitment

- Work with local organizations that already have a youth participation base but can benefit from enhanced youth development programming. Some examples are mentioned above in the assessment and planning section.

- Allow the youth members to be a part of the program planning process. As mentioned in the assessment and planning section, it is important that the programs are meeting the needs and interests of the target audience. Youth engagement in the planning process also leads to program sustainability because of the personal investment in the program.

- Utilize technology in your marketing strategies. Tools such as Facebook, Twitter, websites, and blogs are potential methods to spread the word.

- Consider planning a kick-off event at the program site to promote the 4-H program to participants, families, and the community. This is also a great way to get a community excited about a new 4-H partnership.

- Encourage current 4-H members to promote the program in their schools and community. This can be done through word of mouth, site visits, digital videos, and other creative ways.

Sustaining Community Partnerships

An essential piece of planning a quality youth development program is identifying sustainability strategies. A sustainable program will survive over time because it includes a plan for (1) identifying diverse funding sources; (2) recruiting staff, volunteer, and participants; (3) strengthening community partnerships; and (4) providing quality research-based programming. "Creating developmentally attentive cultures through sustained and broad collaboration across all community sectors is what makes youth development different and powerful" (Whitlock, 2004, p. 3). There are several ways that 4-H can partner with local community organizations and foster sustainable community partnership.

Key Elements of Sustaining Community Partnerships

- Identify how both 4-H and the community organization can benefit from a partnership that will create and/or strengthen a youth development program.

- Create a memorandum of understanding between 4-H and the community organizations. Check out the _A 4-H Afterschool Resource Guide: Starting 4-H Clubs in After-school Programs_ (Floyd et al., 2003) for a sample MOU.

- Conduct regularly scheduled meetings with the partner for planning, updates, and potential program adjustments.

- Provide training in 4-H and best youth development practices when appropriate.

- Identify various funding streams and possible grant collaborations.

- Consider joint community service projects between 4-H and the partner organization.

Program Evaluation

Program evaluation is another essential component to planning, funding, and sustaining a 4-H Youth Development outreach program. Program goals and objectives along with evaluation methods and tools should be identified during the assessment and planning phase. In order to know if your program is meeting the identified goals and is making an impact in the participant's life, it's important to evaluate the (1) program quality, (2) program attendance and participation rates, (3) skills learned and (4) behavior change. Being able to communicate the impact of a 4-H youth development program increases the opportunity for diverse funding sources, participant attendance, and

new potential partners. There are several points to consider while planning for the evaluation of your program.

Key Elements of Program Evaluation

- Be sure to relate your evaluation methods and tools to your initial program goals and objectives. If a program goal is to increase the diversity within your 4-H program, be sure to create a tool where you can compare program diversity before and after the program begins. If a program objective is to increase skills in science, consider using a pre and post test that document any skills learned.

- Be sure that the evaluation tools are age appropriate.

- Research examples of grant proposals to learn more about what data is of interest to funders.

- Consider strategies to conduct longitudinal evaluations. Check out this _National 4-H study of positive youth development_.

- Be sure to identify any requirements with your University Internal Review Board (IRB) if there are plans to publish and share your research through conference presentations.

Summary

Although the 4-H Youth Development program is the largest youth-serving organization in the country, we have an opportunity to reach the lives of even more young people. 4-H has the ability to provide quality youth development programs to young people who don't have access to quality programs that meet their needs and the needs of their community. 4-H can successfully reach out to these communities with proper assessment and planning, quality training, participant recruitment, quality programs, sustainable partnerships, and evaluation. The 4-H Youth Development program has research-based curricula and opportunities to better the lives of youth from all backgrounds. Following these strategies and key elements can help you reach new audiences and impact the lives of more youth!

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