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Integrating Underutilized Black Volunteers in 4-H Youth Development Programs

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Abstract. 4-H Youth Development prides itself on providing essential resources to reach underserved minority populations. 4-H provides programming and professional development for volunteers to include diverse hands-on training, and cultural competency workshops. This article provides best practices for the inclusion of African American volunteers in 4-H programming efforts that could help extension educators better understand the need to include minority volunteer roles and responsibilities. These strategies include strengthening diverse volunteer make-up, increasing participation and trust among African American youth, and engaging volunteers working in educational organizations that could provide real world experiences for youth.

INTRODUCTION

Volunteer involvement in youth development programs is critical in planning meaningful and successful programs for underserved urban youth, especially in Black communities, where engagement in 4-H is low. 4-H youth development programs should continue to recruit, train, and identify diverse volunteers who reflect the youths in their communities. Efforts to develop traditional 4-H programs in urban and underserved communities face many challenges, and thus modifications are necessary to better serve their youths, such as diversifying and recruiting new volunteers (Bovitz et al., 2018). Today, 4-H volunteer involvement among parents showcases additional skill sets and experiences that could be valuable to 4-H programs in diverse settings (Culp et al., 2005). One way to increase enrollment among Black or minority youths in underserved communities is to engage other sets of volunteers, such as parents, mentors, or leaders, who look like the youths served in the community.

Avent and Jayaratne (2017) have pointed out that youths in underserved communities have low engagement in 4-H programs, which could have lasting negative effects toward participating, including the establishment of trust, awareness, and affordability. 4-H programs that consider underserved community resources, such as collaborations and partnerships, parent involvement, and addressing the challenges centered around youth trust and cultural barriers, make a difference (Bovitz et al., 2018). While more attention is now focused on disparities facing underserved communities and their youths, more efforts are needed (Webster, 2016). Specifically, limited research has considered the involvement of Black volunteers in 4-H programs and the effects of their participation on youths.

BLACK 4-H YOUTH & VOLUNTEER PARTICIPATION

A number of researchers (Cano & Bankston, 1992; Russell & Heck, 2008; Schinker, 2010; Weikert et al., 2015) have explored factors associated with participation and nonparticipation of minority youths in 4-H youth development programs. Several important findings relating to access, barriers, and parental involvement have been identified as relevant factors in minority youths' participation in 4-H programs. Cano and Bankston (1992) and Weikert et al. (2015) have pointed out that having a caring and trusting adult with common ties or interest in a program would be a motivational component to underserved Black youths to joining an after-school program. Cano and Bankston

(1992) have noted several constraints, including improvement of new knowledge and material for urban audiences, additional funding for more staff in urban areas, and lack of equitable treatment and criteria for judging projects in 4-H youth development programming. In addition, urban youths were less excited about special projects, such as animal science, due to having limited experience based on their urban locations and not being near farm areas in rural settings (Cano & Bankston, 1992).

Cano and Bankston (1992) have also noted that spending more time on planning and marketing 4-H programs among underserved communities would contribute to active participation. Parents mentioned that many adults would be interested in knowing more about the 4-H program (Cano & Bankston, 1992). Gill et al. (2010) have reported that parents and guidance counselors were the greatest influences on 4-H members' decisions to enroll and participate in 4-H programs in underserved settings. Archer-Banks and Behar-Horenstein (2008) have pointed out influential factors among Black parents involved in middle-school youth experiences, including flexible locations for meetings, mentoring and homework assistance, enhanced expectations for Black youths, and inclusiveness toward cultures that increases parents' knowledge and involvement. In addition, Howard (2015) has reported that parents perceive school-affiliated educational programs as lacking in efforts to recruit and engage Black volunteers in extracurricular activities. Therefore, action steps are needed to foster an environment that prepares minority volunteers to engage underserved Black youths.

BEST PRACTICES FOR ENGAGING BLACK VOLUNTEERS

Research shows that low-income, minority communities hold the same attitudes and expectations about education and pastime experiences as other communities, yet they are faced with greater barriers that may limit involvement (Murray et al., 2014). A review of literature was conducted to glean best practices as they relate to Black community engagement in 4-H youth development programs.

While it is evident that Black parents seemingly want to be more involved in extracurricular experiences with their children, evident limitations prevent this involvement from happening. The following table highlights some best practices to consider while seeking the participation of Black volunteers in 4-H youth development programs.

CONCLUSION

Recognizing the need to encourage Black volunteer involvement within community organizations as a missing link to minority participation is a modern-day issue that needs to be addressed. While it is evident that more minority parents need to be actively involved in such roles as community volunteers, highlighting strategies and providing action items to be implemented by organizational leaders is a step in the right direction. The aforementioned strategies provide recommendations for underserved Black communities to not only recruit and maintain parents and youth participants but also set the tone for 4-H programs to create modifications within current programming efforts, working toward an ultimate goal of creating a greater minority youth presence in 4-H programs.

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Table 1. Best Practices for Integrating Black Volunteers Into 4-H Youth Development Programs

Best practice	Supporting literature	Strategies
Incorporate diverse staff members	Racial, ethnic, and cultural similarities between program staff, participants, and parents influence relationships and daily interactions in a positive way (Camino, 1992).	<p>Recruit faculty and staff members from 1890 universities.</p> <p>Use undergraduate and graduate student organizations, such as Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources and Related Sciences (MANRRS) and Collegiate Farm Bureau, for recruitment.</p> <p>Initiate networking opportunities in diverse communities and businesses (e.g., barbershops and hair salons).</p>
Develop relevant programs	Developing relevant programming for diverse populations can encourage parent participation in community-led experiences (Moodie & Ramos, 2014).	<p>Identify current in-school and after-school programs.</p> <p>Identify community programming needs (e.g., soft skills development, public speaking).</p> <p>Develop programming based on the identified community needs.</p> <p>Identify a need to create an environment where parents can be involved in the development of new programs as well as the adaptation of existing programs.</p>
Involve parents in program development	While developing “culturally relevant” programming in the community, it is imperative to include individuals who are representative of key stakeholders (Parra Cardona et al., 2012).	<p>Partner with faith-based communities, recreational organizations, and other community-based organizations to recruit parents and participants (e.g., recreational sports centers, Boys & Girls Clubs).</p> <p>Provide parents with an active role in program planning, development, and volunteerism.</p>
Adapt existing programming	Community organizations have current programs being implemented on a regular basis (Moodie & Ramos, 2014). To engage Black parents, programs’ design and delivery can be adapted (Moodie & Ramos, 2014).	<p>Enhance programming modes of delivery. Provide continuous access to programs via synchronous and asynchronous experiences (e.g., social media engagement, Zoom, recorded training modules).</p> <p>Incorporate innovative tactics with traditional programming (e.g., incorporate the use of technology, online learning modules).</p> <p>Partner with Greek organizations (Pan Hellenic Council Organizations) that include mentoring and educational programming goals and models in which parents are active and leading members.</p>
Meet families where they are	To engage Black parents in community activities, it is imperative to realize that not all parents have the ability to attend due to such limitations as transportation (Moodie & Ramos, 2014).	<p>Use community centers for 4-H programming, volunteer training, and 4-H club meetings (e.g., community centers and churches).</p> <p>Gain support and build relationships with Black church and community leaders for support of essential needs (e.g., transportation, meeting space, meals).</p>

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