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Best Practices for Establishing Positive 4-H Youth Development Programming in Urban At-Risk Communities

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Abstract

Urban, and primarily Latino, youths have traditionally been an underserved audience for the 4-H program due to language barriers, transportation issues, and lack of history with, knowledge of, and trust in the program. By developing strategies to assess community needs, develop community partnerships and collaborations, and address issues of trust and cultural barriers, Extension can establish programs in these communities that not only are successful but also become sustainable. We share lessons learned and best practices that can serve as tools in developing and maintaining such programs.

Keywords: [urban 4-H](#), [at-risk youths](#), [volunteer recruitment](#), [community partnerships](#), [Latino](#)

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Urban, and specifically Latino, youths have traditionally been an underserved audience for the 4-H program due to language barriers, transportation issues, and lack of history with, knowledge of, and trust in the program (Webster, 2016). With the Latino population growing in many urban areas of New Jersey, an urban-based 4-H program was funded through a Children, Youth, and Families at Risk (CYFAR) grant for developing and sustaining positive youth development programming in Latino neighborhoods. We implemented this programming in two urban communities using the traditional 4-H club structure. However, our efforts to develop standard 4-H programs in urban at-risk communities revealed challenges related to recruiting and retaining community-based volunteers, addressing language and cultural differences, and providing for sustainability of programming; thus, modifications were required. Herein we provide recommendations for addressing challenges in developing 4-H programming in urban at-risk communities.

Program Overview

The Strong Kids, Stronger Communities program, funded through a CYFAR grant from 2010 to 2015, provided 4-H youth development opportunities for underserved youths in New Brunswick and Newark, New Jersey, with a focus on Latino neighborhoods. We implemented strategies that included using community volunteers, AmeriCorps members, and university students to deliver programs. In addition, we formed partnerships with community organizations providing in-school enrichment, summer camps, and 4-H clubs that modeled 4-H

special interest (SPIN) club strategies (University of Illinois, 2015). Due to our adapting traditional methods of implementing programs to better fit the unique needs of these communities, the resulting 4-H program experienced growth and is sustainable. Youth participants became fully integrated in traditional 4-H county and state programming, including public speaking events, county fairs, a regional 4-H teen conference, and Rutgers University science-based programs.

Insight into Best Practices

On the basis of our challenges and successes, we can suggest best practices related to various aspects of program development and maintenance. If you are involved in implementing 4-H programming in urban at-risk communities, the insights provided here may serve as guidance.

Assessing Community Needs

It is important not to have a preconceived notion of the methods you will use to develop and implement programming when working with a new community. In order to deliver relevant, well-attended programming, community input is necessary. In the spring of 2012, 4-H professionals administered a four-page youth interest survey in the two urban communities we targeted. The survey measured interest in topic areas and the type of programming youths were involved in. The results of the survey guided the development of programming that fit the needs and interests of the community. 4-H professionals used the resources of Rutgers University to develop these surveying tools and to assess resources already available to clientele.

Planning for Sustainability

When working with an urban at-risk audience, it is important to begin with the end in mind and plan for sustainability. Developing a plan to ensure consistency is vital to maintaining the level of trust needed when working with new community members unfamiliar with your program. Developing and maintaining strong collaborations with community partners is also vital for success. When community partners have a vested interest in the program, they will more readily assist with securing funding, retaining adult volunteer support, securing program space, and providing for ongoing program development.

Developing Community Collaborations

As indicated above, strategic partnerships with community businesses, local government, public organizations, and individual community leaders are key to addressing some of the challenges faced by urban 4-H programs. Community collaboration allows for the pooling of resources to successfully reach shared goals (Hoskins & Angelica, 2005). Staff turnover, overcommitment, lack of follow-up, and competition for the same resources are some of the many challenges faced in program development and implementation, especially when working with an at-risk community. Setting realistic expectations, joining existing networks, using written agreements, and writing collaborative grants are ways to achieve success and overcome challenges. One of the most significant partnerships established through the Strong Kids, Stronger Communities program was with Rutgers University students, faculty, and staff, who served as club- and resource-level volunteers. With this audience, the traditional model of utilizing community adults and parents as volunteers was not successful, and this partnership helped us overcome that obstacle.

Building Trust Through Cultural Awareness

To build trust, it is important to understand the culture of a community. For example, learning how certain cultures understand the concept of "volunteerism" has transformed recruitment efforts in Latino communities. A recent Extension study found that Latinos do not volunteer in the traditional way that is seen in mainstream community organizations; rather, their priorities relate to family, neighborhood, and church (Hobbs, 2001). This difference in perspective on volunteerism steered those involved with recruitment efforts to establish truly local programming, with a neighborhood focus, versus the traditional city or county context. Additionally, partnerships with the faith-based community opened doors to new volunteers and youths.

Communities can be wary of contact with an unfamiliar youth development initiative. This guardedness can be addressed by finding a community-based contact who can serve as a "cause champion" to introduce 4-H to the others in the community. It is also beneficial to identify and hire support staff who can relate to the community being served.

Reflecting and Revising

When developing new programs, it is necessary to recognize when a method is not effective and revise as needed. After 5 years of establishing programming in the new communities, we recognized that the original vision of implementing traditional 4-H club programming in nontraditional communities was not the most effective approach. Our preliminary approach to working in the urban communities involved recruiting members and volunteers to participate in the traditional New Jersey 4-H chartered club model, whereby clubs meet once a month for more than a year, complete project record books, and elect and hold officer meetings. Community and university volunteers were not able to commit to this traditional 4-H meeting schedule and club structure. After reviewing volunteer feedback, we revised the program delivery strategy to offer short-term SPIN clubs. The modified programming was successful because it relied on short-term volunteers and readily available curricula designed for that type of club structure (University of Illinois, 2015).

Conclusion

We successfully introduced 4-H programming that has been sustainable in two urban at-risk communities through development and implementation of a needs assessment, establishment of community partnerships and trust within the community, and evaluation and revision of approaches to program delivery. Others may be able to use the best practices described herein to do the same.

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