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## A Partnership Model for Training Episodic Environmental Stewardship 4-H Volunteers

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## A Partnership Model for Training Episodic Environmental Stewardship 4-H Volunteers

### Abstract

The Marin Environmental Stewardship pilot project demonstrates the potential for a partnership model that brings together external and internal collaborators to recruit and train episodic 4-H volunteers to meet environmental education needs within a community. The clientele served by the volunteers trained through the project was at-risk, urban youth. In this model, the University of California Cooperative Extension provided project design and leadership, youth development professionals, and natural resources expertise. The community partner provided volunteers, training facility, transportation for field trips, community sites for service, and support material for program delivery. The resulting framework provided a strategy for other professionals.

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### Introduction

Research substantiates that youth benefit from regular contact with nature during early adolescence (Kellert, 2002), as well as from quality outdoor education experiences that help build social skills (White, 2004). The need for these opportunities is intensified by dramatic changes to play areas due to urbanization, socioeconomic disparities, and safety issues (White, 2004). Many children, particularly at-risk youth in urban and suburban areas, often have limited opportunities to experience nature in a natural and experiential way (Louv, 2005). In response to these needs, the University of California Cooperative Extension Marin County (UCCE) conceived and developed the Environmental Stewardship pilot project for at-risk urban youth in Marin County, CA.

The recruitment and training of volunteers to serve as nonformal educators is central to the success of 4-H programming (Boyd, 2004; Stedman & Rudd, 2006). Evidence supports the idea that short-term, episodic volunteers can be as effective as long-term ones (Hart, 2005). Though the use of episodic volunteers is not new to 4-H (Culp, McKee, & Nestor, 2005; Hart, 2005), the project described here developed community extenders through a unique combination of internal and

external partnerships. Specifically, experts in natural resources and youth development within UCCE collaborated to develop the content, pedagogy, and youth development components of a pilot project. UCCE Marin County identified Conservation Corps North Bay (CCNB), a regional organization focused on natural resource conservation and community development, as the partner for the project. This choice was apparent given several factors: previous successful collaborations between UCCE and CCNB; identification of CCNB's AmeriCorps members as extenders; and a longitudinal study that provided evidence of significant impacts of CCNB's AmeriCorps members on the community (Shamieh, 2004).

## Partnership Structure

The 2-year Environmental Stewardship pilot project focused on the UCCE-led training of AmeriCorps members who implemented community-based environmental education activities with agencies and summer day camp sessions for at-risk, urban youth. The training series that was offered in both years was designed with alternating monthly sessions for natural resources and youth development, using an inquiry-based learning approach with modeling and practice. Each training session was scheduled for approximately 3 to 4 hours in length, with youth development sessions delivered in a classroom setting and natural resources content delivered in the classroom and in the field.

The emphasis of the AmeriCorps members' training on natural resources content included ecosystems, water, plants, birds, wildlife, and working landscapes. The general format for the natural resources sessions was an indoor presentation followed by a field trip to a nearby natural area. Instructors provided examples and modeled youth activities that related to the content. Extenders then practiced implementing their youth activities to solidify their knowledge of both the content and appropriate delivery techniques. Training sessions devoted solely to youth development topics followed a general format of visual presentations of concepts, two interactive activities, sharing of supplemental resources, relevance and application to natural resources field studies, and debriefing followed by evaluation.

Relative to the partnership structure of the project, each agency brought its respective assets that were incorporated in a manner that supported an integrated implementation. UCCE provided project design and leadership, youth development professionals, and natural resources expertise. Complementing these assets, CCNB provided the volunteers, the training facility, transportation for field trips, community sites for service, and support material for program delivery.

## Preliminary Findings

The Marin Environmental Stewardship pilot project involved a number of participants at different levels: UCCE personnel who conducted trainings; CCNB administrators; invited community partners who acted as lecturers; AmeriCorps members who participated in trainings; at-risk, urban youth enrolled in summer day camp programs; and other youth contacted through community agencies (Table 1). Approximately 39% of the enrolled youth day campers were represented by ethnic minorities.

**Table 1.**

Summary of Participant Data from Marin Environmental Stewardship Pilot Project

<b>Participants</b>	<b>UCCE Personnel</b>	<b>CCNB Administrators</b>	<b>AmeriCorps Members Trained</b>	<b>Youth Enrolled in Day Camps</b>	<b>Additional Youth Contacts</b>
Year 1	5	2	22	170	1,754
Year 2	6	4	22	130	874

Preliminary data were collected in the form of post-project surveys and interviews with AmeriCorps members, UCCE personnel, and CCNB staff. Results revealed that CCNB and AmeriCorps volunteers valued the natural resource expertise provided by UCCE staff, but placed less importance on the youth development component of the program. While UCCE staff concurred that the natural resource expertise was valuable in providing authenticity and exposure to local and regional environmental issues, they also viewed the youth development component and youth leadership opportunities as essential to the overall process.

### **Implications & Recommendations**

Recruiting and training episodic volunteers through external partnerships is a viable strategy for 4-H programming. In the Marin Environmental Stewardship pilot project, AmeriCorps members associated with CCNB were trained by UCCE experts to lead environmental education activities with at-risk urban youth. Although partnerships with external agencies are not uncommon in Extension, the feature that distinguishes the pilot project described here is the addition of internal partnerships with county-based natural resources and youth development staff from UCCE. This internal partnership resulted in the deliberate blending of natural resources subject matter with youth development to help provide richer, deeper professional development opportunities for the participating AmeriCorps members.

Although further testing of this model is recommended, the resulting framework provides a strategy for consideration by other 4-H professionals. The components of the model developed from this pilot project include:

- Identify an external partner agency that includes extenders, such as AmeriCorps members, who can serve as episodic volunteers for 4-H programming.
- Identify internal partners that complement the subject matter content that is the focus of the targeted 4-H programming.
- Create a shared understanding of each agency's role prior to implementation.
- Develop a professional development strategy that includes subject matter content and principles of positive youth development.

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