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4-H Youth Futures—College Within Reach

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Abstract: 4-H Youth Futures-College Within Reach is an innovative program that promotes college as an obtainable goal for high school-age youths who are not typically encouraged to attend college such as "first in family" and racial/ethnic minority students. The program is a collaborative effort of state, regional, and county Extension faculty and staff from the state's 1862 and 1890 land-grant universities. Drawing from research on best practices, Youth Futures includes intensive mentoring, college orientation, and student progress follow-up. Program evaluations suggest that Youth Futures is effective in encouraging underserved students to enroll in and persist in college

Introduction

Colleges and universities are increasing efforts to recruit and retain underserved students such as first-generation college students, ethnic minority groups, and students from working-class families (Padron, 1992). As an outreach of land-grant universities, 4-H programs are well positioned to help adolescents with college preparation and access.

Many underserved students are less prepared for college-academically, psychologically, and financially-than students who come from college-educated families (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). Research-based best practices to improve college attendance include college awareness experiences, mentoring programs, and parent and peer involvement (National College Access Network, 2007). It is particularly important for underserved students to complete an orientation course that addresses social adjustment issues as well the student effort required and support systems available for success in college (Mitchell, 2001).

The 4-H Youth Futures-College Within Reach Program is using best practices to increase college attendance by underserved youths, including ethnic/minority and first-generation students.

Program

4-H Youth Futures is a collaborative effort of Missouri's 1862 and 1890 land-grant universities, University of Missouri and Lincoln University. State, regional, and county Extension faculty and staff give leadership to the program, which has two key components.

Mentoring-In targeted communities, Extension educators and volunteers recruit high school-age students for the program. Extension personnel serve as mentors, providing intensive and sustained support. Mentors have contact with youth at least quarterly to discuss college preparation (e.g., grades, study skills, applications and scholarship forms, ACT tests, etc). Mentors attend the annual Youth Futures conference with mentees and assist state coordinators with follow-up and tracking of youth participants.

Orientation-The annual Youth Futures Conference helps youths learn about academic programs, student activities, financial assistance, and college survival skills. Completing a practice ACT test, residing in college dorms, attending classes, and participating in campus activities help youths prepare for and be successful in college.

Table 1 provides participant demographics. The mean age of participants is 16 years, with an equal number of males and females.

Table 1.
Characteristics of Youth Futures Participants

Year	Race/Ethnicity	Family Structure
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	Number of Participants	African-American	Latino	Caucasian	2-parent household	Single-parent household	Foster, self, or relative care
2004	57	91%	7%	2%	35%	44%	21%
2005	48	91%	7%	2%	37%	50%	13%
2006	47	90%	8%	2%	51%	23%	25%

Outcomes

Once participants are enrolled in Youth Futures, preparation for college such as ACT practice, completing college and scholarship applications, and enrollment is tracked. Youth are followed from the first time they attend the Youth Futures conference until their sophomore year in college.

In Missouri, an average of 65% of high-school students transition to post-secondary education at 2-year or 4-year institutions. In contrast, the 27 high schools attended by Youth Futures participants had an average rate of transition to post-secondary education of 58%. As shown in Table 2, the rate of college attendance by Youth Futures participants exceeds that average.

Table 2.
Youth Futures Post-high School Participation

Cohort	# Graduating High School	% in College	% in Workforce	Mov Pro
2004	21	67% (14)	19% (4)	14.
2005	27	66% (18)	14.5% (4)	18.
2006	34	64% (21)	15% (5)	20.

Tracking data also shows that Youth Futures graduates persist in college. Of the participants who graduated from high school between 2002 and 2005, 53% are currently in college, and 7% graduated from community college.

In spring 2007, a focus group was conducted with a sample of Youth Futures graduates currently enrolled in college (n=5). Students reported that the program met tangible needs that their families couldn't meet. Other benefits identified were the formation of friendships and social support networks, having a personal campus contact, and workshops designed to help with transition into college life. Students reported that the relationship with their Youth Futures mentor was a critical factor in their college success.

Conclusion

The Youth Futures program is utilizing the best practices recommended by NCAN and others for college access programming (NCAN, 2007; Swail and Hosford, 2005). The combination of long-term mentoring and orientation offered through 4-H programming appears to be an effective approach to supporting non-traditional students and high-need students in their quest for a college education. Learn more about Youth Futures at:

<<http://mo4h.missouri.edu/programs/youthfutures/>>.

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