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Experiential Learning in Workforce Preparation--An Application for Success

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Experiential Learning in Workforce Preparation--An Application for Success

Abstract

The University of Maine Cooperative Extension collaborated with Cherryfield Foods, Inc. to create an innovative experiential training program that qualified youth to participate in the mechanical harvesting of wild blueberries. Youth who successfully completed the course were guaranteed summer employment with the company. This allowed youth to earn an income while applying and refining their newly acquired skills. Twenty-eight of the 31 youth trained were employed during subsequent blueberry harvest seasons, with no injuries reported. The success of this program resulted from the application of positive youth development principles coupled with an employment incentive.

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Introduction

Low bush blueberries are the largest agricultural crop produced in Washington County, Maine. Traditionally this crop has been harvested by hand with small, specialized rakes. Local residents, including youth and Mexican migrant workers, are the predominant labor force for the 1-month harvest season. Over the last decade, blueberry-processing companies started using tractor-powered mechanized harvesting equipment. U.S. Department of Labor regulations do not allow companies to hire youth under the age of 16 to work on such equipment without first completing a safety certification course.

Prior to 2003, Cherryfield Foods, Inc. hired 16- and 17-year-old youth who would typically work for one season, and then upon graduation from high school, leave the local area. UMCE was approached by the company, requesting help to devise and offer a safety training program. By training youth as young as age 14, the company anticipated being able to retain them as productive employees for several consecutive harvest seasons.

Program Delivery

The educational focus of this program was based on positive youth development principles that would incorporate critical safety aspects and specific job-related skills while emphasizing the practical application of knowledge, development of skills, and acquiring a sense of responsibility, initiative, and self-worth.

The 20-hour Blueberry Harvester Safety Course, the first of its kind, moved youth away from a dry textbook-focused tractor safety course into a learning environment that combined a variety of

hands-on activities with practical individualized driving instruction on both tractors and mechanical harvesters. Participants did more than just listen to a firefighter talk about different fire extinguishers--they actually used them to put out a small contained fire. Youth didn't just read statistics and stories of farm injuries--they experienced what it would be like to lose a limb or be paralyzed. Simulations included tying their shoes while their thumb was taped down, making peanut butter sandwiches with their dominant arm inside their shirt, and sitting perfectly still with the exception of head movement for 60 seconds. They met and talked with a local community member who lost his arm in a PTO shaft. They worked in teams to identify and correct potential safety hazards in simulated scenarios.

To take students beyond simply reading about safety checks, an equipment safety checklist was developed and performed each day before driving instruction started. In addition to driving tractors, participants spent time on mechanical harvesters, learning about specific safety issues and practicing harvesting-related skills. Youth received earplugs, safety eyewear, and work gloves and learned how to read UV protection labels for sunglasses and sunscreens. Worker Protection Standards (pesticide safety) certification was integrated into the training as well. A game show-style review of key concepts that would be included on the written test actively engaged learners and helped to alleviate anxiety before the final exam.

Key Components

Experiential learning was the key to this program's success. In order for the participants to internalize the learning, they needed to go beyond just attending the course. They needed the opportunity to process what they were learning in the classroom and the opportunity to self-correct and learn from the experiences. The final step in the process involved applying their knowledge and skills to a real-life situation. Cherryfield Foods, Inc. played a critical role in providing the opportunity for application by guaranteeing a job during the harvest to any youth who successfully completed the course.

Research tells us that the level of mastery is dependent on the developmental ability of the individual youth (Kress, 2004). Extension educators selected appropriate study materials and created activities that would enhance participants' development and learning. In addition, they made sure driving instructors had an understanding of developmentally appropriate practices and were using techniques to provide a learning environment conducive to such standards.

Impacts Achieved

1. All 31 youth who have taken the harvester safety training since its inception in 2003 have passed the driving exam and the written exam with a score of 91% or higher. Three quarters of the course participants had never operated a tractor prior to the course.
2. Twenty-eight of the 31 youth trained were employed during the blueberry harvest immediately following their certification. To date, no injuries have been reported.
3. Cherryfield Foods, Inc. reported 75% of the youth participants they hired in 2003 and 2004 were rehired for the 2005 harvest.
4. During the 2003 and 2004 harvest, youth reported earning an average of \$3,000 to \$5,000 each. One youth harvested an unprecedented 19 pallets of blueberries (a total of 37,050 pounds of berries) in 1 day!
5. Cherryfield Foods, Inc. estimated that each youth working on a single-head mechanical blueberry harvester was able to harvest an average of 250,000 pounds of blueberries per season. Without qualified laborers to work on the back of these harvesters, at an average price of 0.47 per pound, the estimated crop loss could be \$117,500 per harvester.
6. As a direct result of the successful youth training program, Cherryfield Foods, Inc. asked for a similar training for Mexican migrant workers. In June 2005, eight Spanish-speaking employees successfully completed a daylong blueberry harvester safety course.
7. As a result of one youth participating in the 2004 training, Wyman's Blueberry, another large blueberry processing company in Washington County, changed their policy of not hiring youth under the age of 18 to work on the mechanical harvesters, to hiring youth age 14 and older, provided they have received certification through this Blueberry Harvester Safety Course.

Conclusion

This innovative collaboration between Extension and Cherryfield Foods, Inc. was successful at

many levels. The program provided youth in the most impoverished county in Maine with an experiential learning opportunity to develop workforce preparation skills. Safety skills learned are applicable to a multitude of real-life situations, and most important, youth were able to apply what they had learned in a high-paying, challenging summer job once they successfully completed the program. The Blueberry Harvester Safety Course received the 2005 Northeast Extension Directors' Program of Excellence Award.

References

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