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4-H Youth Development Apprenticeship Program: A Pilot of a New Certification in Youth Development

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4-H Youth Development Apprenticeship Program: A Pilot of a New Certification in Youth Development

Abstract

The field of youth development is expanding, requiring 4-H Extension staff to gain expertise in the field without leaving their jobs to return to school. To address this need, the 4-H Youth Development Practitioner Apprenticeship (YDPA) program was developed under the guidance of the National Association of Extension 4-H Agents and the National 4-H Council through funding from the U. S. Department of Labor. An evaluation of the pilot of YDPA found that staff gained numerous skills needed to effectively serve youth. Suggestions for program continuation are discussed.

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The field of youth development has expanded in the past 15 years (Quinn, 2004). With this expansion is a need for Extension 4-H personnel to gain expertise in the field without leaving their jobs to return to school. To address this need, the 4-H Youth Development Practitioner Apprenticeship (YDPA)* program was developed under the guidance of the National Association of Extension 4-H Agents (NAE4-HA) and National 4-H Council through funding from the U. S. Department of Labor. This article discusses findings from an evaluation of the YDPA first year pilot to determine the effectiveness and feasibility of continuing the program.

YDPA is an Extension education and training initiative targeting frontline practitioners who deliver comprehensive services to youth. Through a structured apprenticeship program of Related Instruction (RI) and On-the-job Training (OJT), practitioners develop skills needed to effectively serve youth. Upon completion of the program, the Practitioner Apprentices receive a certificate from their State Department of Labor. The goals of the initiative are to:

- Provide training standards for the youth development practitioner occupation,
- Increase the number of youth workers receiving extensive, quality training,
- Increase retention of youth workers,
- Provide training and mentoring opportunities,
- Provide a career path, and
- Provide national recognition for successful completion of the apprenticeship

Program Description

The National 4-H YDPA program was piloted beginning in the fall of 2002. A national design team made up of youth development professionals from 14 land-grant universities developed the procedures, policies, and requirements for program participants. In September 2003, five land-grant universities became pilot sites for the program. A total of 14 Apprentices and 14 Master Practitioners enrolled in the program.

The Apprenticeship Program consists of 345 hours of RI and 3,000-4,000 hours of OJT based on core competencies for each apprentice. There has not been consensus in the broader youth development field as to the core competencies needed for youth workers (Astroth, Garza, & Taylor, 2004). Even defining youth development has been challenging (Hamilton, Hamilton, & Pittman, 2004). The YDPA program however was able to base its content on the 4-H Professional Research and Knowledge Competencies (Coleman et al., 2004) that were in use in 2002. Included were the following areas:

- Youth Development
- Youth Program Development
- Organizational Systems
- Partnerships
- Volunteerism

RI consists of educational experiences (training, workshops, courses, etc.) that engage the Apprentice in content and subject matter information about youth development. RI is designed to provide the Apprentice a strong academic research base and understanding to enhance the ability of the Apprentice to offer and implement programs and activities that are appropriate, effective, sustainable, and justifiable as "best practices" of youth development.

OJT supplements the RI requirements through involving the Apprentice in systematic application and practice. Here Apprentices demonstrate their professional knowledge, including individual planning, program design and delivery, assessment, and communication with youth, adults, the community, and co-workers.

Each Apprentice works towards certification under the guidance and supervision of a Practitioner. Successful completion of an apprenticeship takes from 2 to 3 years. Apprentices with prior youth development work experience can receive credit up to 100 hours credit for RI and up to 1,000 hours for OJT. Upon successful completion of RI and OJT, Apprentices can be certified by the state Department of Labor as a Youth Practitioner Journey Worker.

Sample

The pilot for the YDPA program consisted of 14 pairs of enrolled Practitioners and Apprentices from across the United States. Of this group, 13 pairs completed the pilot program. One Apprentice left work with Extension for personal reasons during the pilot.

The Practitioners had a substantial number of years in Extension, ranging from a minimum of 6 years to a maximum of 33. Practitioners were Specialists or County Agent/Educators. Practitioners ranged in age from 41-63 years. Twelve of the 13 Practitioners had graduate degrees, and the other held a Bachelor's degree with some graduate credit.

The Apprentices held one of three job titles: five were classified as Program Assistants, five were Program Coordinators, and the remaining three were Extension Educators. Six of the Apprentices had some college education, three had a Bachelors degree, and four had graduate school classes or degrees. The age range of Apprentices was 23 to 56 years of age. The Apprentices had less experience with the Extension system than the Practitioners, with an average of 3.9 years and a range of one to 9.5 years.

Methods and Results

This pilot study included qualitative and quantitative data collection. Data were gathered electronically with the participants emailing their responses to the evaluator.

Monthly Logs

Practitioners and Apprentices were asked to keep monthly logs of their experiences in the pilot. A set of open-ended questions was electronically mailed to the participants at the first of each month asking that they reflect back on the previous month's experience. A content analysis was conducted on these data where the evaluator examined emerging themes (Krippendorff, 2004).

Time Spent with Practitioners

Apprentices and Practitioners met on a regular basis, with an average of 2.7 meetings per month. (Total range of meetings is a low of one per month to a high of 17 times per month.) Thirty-nine

percent of the meetings were held face-to-face, followed by email contact, which made up 32% of the meetings. Phone contact was used by several pairs who were not located in the same office. The average length of time per meeting was 1 hour and 20 minutes.

On-the-Job Training

More than 6,678 hours of On-the-Job Training (OJT) were provided during the 9 months of the pilot. The average number of hours per month is 57, with a range of 5 to 179 hours. One Apprentice listed unreasonably high amounts of OJT each month. Her hours were not reflected in these results.

YDPA-Related Instruction

Apprentices participating in this pilot project attended more than 1,153 hours of YDPA approved training during the 9 months. The range was 0 to 50 hours per month.

Support to Participants

Nearly all Apprentices and Practitioners reported that they had the support and resources needed to participate in the pilot. Sources of support reported include:

- *Youthworks* Self Study Guides
- Tools from the YDPA training
- Family and coworkers
- Planning guide
- University and other educational opportunities
- Materials from other states

Professional Growth

Professional growth in Apprentices was noted from the first month of reporting. Although some reported it was too early to tell, others cited:

- Excitement and enthusiasm
- Taking time to think
- Working with advisory boards
- Resource management
- Learning to take one thing at a time
- Understanding of youth development

Excitement and enthusiasm about one's job were more frequently reported by Practitioners than by Apprentices. One Practitioner reported about her Apprentice,

As a result of participating in the Galaxy conference, she has a broader view of Extension in the (state) and in the nation. She has lots of excitement and enthusiasm for youth development work. She is willing to take a risk to do the right things for kids.

New areas of professional development noted in month two included:

- Leadership
- Ability to handle criticism
- Broader view of Extension
- Confidence and preparedness
- Ability to handle stress
- Developing skills to work with teens
- Time management

The development of leadership is demonstrated in the following quote from a Practitioner about her Apprentice:

This month she conducted several major 4-H events in her county, with increasing self-confidence and preparation awareness. She is assuming chairmanship of our Multi-County 4-H staff meetings for the next two years after a very successful two-year stint as recorder for the group.

The Practitioner reported in the following month, "She conducted an annual Leaders' Banquet incorporating many (some new) recognition techniques. Her organization and preparation skills are excellent!"

Constructive criticism can be difficult for people to hear. Some Apprentices found that they were learning to handle criticism better as illustrated in this quote,

I have been able to withstand taking criticism throughout the past month. I have learned that criticism is good and will help me to better my programs and myself. In the past I have had a problem with taking criticism and thought people were being too difficult/hard on me but now I can see things differently and positively.

Evidence of a broader view of Extension became a stronger theme over the course of the pilot. One Apprentice reported midway through the pilot,

I believe things are truly beginning to sink in. In my first year people would discuss issues that did not seem to either make sense or apply to me but now I can see how everything at one time or another will be a factor in what I am trying to accomplish.

Confidence also grew as the Apprentices became more comfortable in their roles. This Apprentice wrote, "I see myself becoming more confident in the presentation and delivery of curriculum, policies, etc."

In the third month Apprentices reported such development as:

- Professional organization
- Collaboration
- Conducting leader training on his/her own
- Expanding training modules to include additional information
- Strategic planning

Professional approach, leadership, and confidence were noted by the Practitioners. One Practitioner reported,

I continue to see her adapting and changing record keeping, program delivery methods, and work habits to best fit different situations. She is also beginning to realize the importance of balancing work and personal life and setting time in her schedule for herself.

In the following months, few new areas of professional development emerged. There was, however, stronger evidence that Apprentices had gained more confidence and ability to do their jobs, particularly in the areas of leadership and seeing the larger picture of youth development and Extension. One Practitioner stated:

(She) is getting better at multitasking. . . . She has been struggling with a teen group that she works with because she wants to be liked. This month she realized that she can not continue to do their role--and she let them know it. She feels bad because she alienated some youth. It is a hard lesson to learn to be an effective educator versus being their friend.

Another Apprentice summarized her experience during the pilot in the following manner:

It has been a very challenging year for me. I have been in constant conflict with coworkers in my office and as a result, some 4-H volunteers. This past month I sat down with the university ombudsman and received training on conflict resolution. I also talked at length with my Practitioner and I have been to three professional counseling sessions. After all of this, I have been able to take a look at my job and myself and determine what's really important. I've been able to sort everything out and put it in perspective. I've also learned a lot about balancing work and home. I am still trying to manage many on-going conflicts, but I feel I have been growing a little bit every month to this point--now I think I'm able to manage them better.

Effectiveness of Master Practitioners

Overwhelmingly the Apprentices reported that their Practitioners were of great assistance. Practitioners provided guidance and assistance in balancing work and family, and offered support. For example,

(My Practitioner) helps me look at things using different perspectives, not always traditional. This has helped me to address topics that need to be discussed, however, the traditional approach resulted in adults going on the defensive and therefore it had never been resolved. I feel that I can now approach this topic from another angle and have a complete discussion.

Time management and the balancing of work and family was a theme that arose throughout the pilot. One Apprentice said of her Practitioner,

She has been a source of information and guidance beyond anyone's expectations. She has continued to serve in a capacity that is both professional and understanding. When I feel overwhelmed with the job and its expectations, she gets me pointed in the right direction.

The lack of time to spend for Apprentices to work with Practitioners was a problem. One participant stated, "The Practitioner can only be as effective as time permits. Both of our schedules have been very busy and it has been hard to find times to meet. We are working to schedule monthly preset meetings."

One Practitioner reported in his last log that his busy schedule had prevented him from participating in the program to the full extent. He suggested that in the future, Practitioners and Apprentices be located in close proximity to one another, preferably in the same office, to better facilitate communication and mentoring.

Workload also presented challenges. One Practitioner reports, "I want to avoid adding to the workload of the Apprentice." Another stated, "I feel I may not be doing enough for my apprentice." Several participants responded that the reporting was time consuming and the computer forms were difficult to use.

Practitioner Apprentice Survey Results

Quantitative data were gathered from the Apprentices through a survey assessing job satisfaction (Spector, 1997) and level of youth development competencies that was developed for this project. The pretest was given to the Apprentices in early September, 2003, and the posttest in early May, 2004 yielded a 100% return rate. Travel funds to attend a conference were given as an incentive to participate. Limited change was found from pretest to posttest, possibly due to the small sample size and the short time frame of the pilot.

Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction was assessed through the Job Satisfaction Survey (Spector, 1997). This measure has nine subcategories of job-related satisfaction. There were no statistically significant differences from pretest to posttest on the entire scale or any subscales with the exception of "promotion." At the posttest there was a statistically significant gain in the respondents believing they had an opportunity for promotion, $t(12) = 2.59$, $p = .02$ (2-tailed).

Understanding of Youth Development

This portion of the survey was developed for the pilot and assessed competencies in the five areas of youth development covered in the YDPA pilot project. Internal reliability was not assessed due to the small sample size. Face validity was assessed by the YDPA administration and others in the youth development field reviewing the instrument prior to implementation. There were no statistically significant differences from pretest to posttest on these constructs. Further exploration of a tool to measure the understanding of youth development is needed.

Challenges in Implementation

Three main challenges emerged in implementing the Apprenticeship program: time, balancing work and family, and distance between Practitioner and Apprentice.

- Time was perhaps the greatest challenge in implementing the programs. Both Practitioner and Apprentice reported being very busy and not having time to meet, particularly face-to-face.
- Gaining experience and expertise while one balances work and family commitments is challenging. During the pilot, two male Apprentices went on paternity leave, and one female Apprentice went on maternity leave. These family issues limited the Apprentices' ability to obtain approved instruction and on-the-job training hours. Practitioners reported trying to assist Apprentices with balancing work and family--a competency area not assessed in this pilot but certainly one that is important in the field of Extension.
- Distance was a barrier for some Practitioner/Apprentice pairs, with each living and working in different communities. This was compounded by winter weather making travel to meetings difficult at times during the year.

Implications for Continuing the YDPA Program

There are several implications for improving the program based on the pilot.

- The lack of time to meet between Practitioner and Apprentice as well as time to complete job tasks and the YDPA project tasks was a theme that repeatedly surfaced during the pilot. Ideally, supervisors would allow a reduction in responsibilities for both the Practitioner and Apprentice during the apprenticeship process. Because the apprenticeship could last several years depending upon how quickly an Apprentice completes the required RI and OJT, perhaps a more realistic reduction of activities could be given during the first 9 to 12 months of the apprenticeship. This would allow the Practitioner and Apprentice to spend more time together and allow a greater opportunity to process what is learned.
- Distance was an issue for some of the Practitioner and Apprentice pairs. The face-to-face meetings appear to be the most beneficial for the Apprentices. Finding a way to locate the Practitioner and Apprentice within the same office would be suggested. However, having said that, there was one pair who did not meet "officially" as they were in the same office and often had casual meetings as needed. When located in the same office it would be important for the Practitioner and Apprentice to schedule meeting times rather than rely on quick spur-of-the-moment contact or meeting.
- Some of the Practitioner and Apprentice pairs met with other pairs when this was possible. Developing local groups of pairs would support the Practitioner and the Apprentice. Even if the local groups covered a few neighboring states, the pairs may have a better opportunity to network with one another.
- Program documentation of OJT and training hours should be examined. Many of the Apprentices commented that the record keeping was time consuming. Additional training on this would be advised.

Conclusion

Although this pilot evaluation had a small sample size and was limited to following participants for 9 months, conclusions can be drawn. First, the qualitative results of the YDPA pilot indicate that this is a feasible way to train youth development workers who are already in Extension but need more expertise. The strongest theme revealed from the qualitative data was that the Apprentices and Practitioners took greater interest and enthusiasm in their jobs.

An overall sense of greater professionalism among the Apprentices was apparent in both the Practitioner and Apprentice monthly logs. Although no increase in knowledge was found in the quantitative data, results suggested that this program increases the Apprentices' sense of opportunity for job advancement. YDPA appears to be one means for youth development workers to gain experience and expertise in the field without having to leave the job to return school.

Afternote

The YDPA program is now called the *4-H Youth Development Apprenticeship Program* and is sponsored by National 4-H Headquarters. See <http://www.national4-hheadquarters.gov/comm/4h_prodev_tpd.htm> for more information.

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