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Building a Collaboration for Youth Development: The "Club-Within-a-Club"

Abstract

This article describes the experiences of Ohio 4-H Youth Development and the Boys & Girls Clubs of Columbus, Inc. to incorporate 4-H clubs within the Boys & Girls Clubs setting. The purpose of the study was to inform the continued collaboration of the two organizations. Staff and youth interviews, participant observation, and review of program records were conducted to gain insight into program implementation. Benefits, challenges, and keys to success were derived. The authors conclude that perception of benefits, compatibility of missions, and the new audience for 4-H outweigh the challenges. Communication through regular meetings is deemed essential.

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Introduction

The 4-H program offers opportunities for many youth to develop into confident, capable, and contributing citizens. However, attracting youth from high-risk environments can present challenges (Hobbs, 1999). Without a family history of 4-H participation, these young people do not readily come forward to enroll in 4-H clubs. Furthermore, 4-H clubs are not routinely offered during the time when the need for positive youth development programming is greatest (e.g., during after-school hours). Such out-of-school time programs can give youth safe, supervised places to be, along with chances to learn new skills, develop their interests, and interact meaningfully with peers and adults (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Posner & Vandell, 1994; U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Justice, 2000).

Hobbs (1999) suggested that Extension youth development professionals could increase access to programs by facilitating cooperative efforts with community-based youth organizations. This represents a challenge, as well as an opportunity, for Extension professionals to devise new ways to reach youth through 4-H programming.

National and state-level studies reveal that youth associated with 4-H experience positive relationships with adults and learn life skills (Astroth & Haynes, 2002; National 4-H Impact Study, 2001; Rodriguez, Hirschl, Mead, & Goggin, 1999). Likewise, many researchers have discussed the importance of participation in activities offered at Boys & Girls Clubs. Positive social and academic outcomes, as well as fewer problem behaviors, have been noted among participants (e.g., Anderson-Butcher, Newsome, & Ferrari, 2003; Roffman, Pagano, & Hirsch, 2001; Schinke, Cole, & Poulin, 2000; St. Pierre, Mark, Kaltreider, & Campbell, 2001). These benefits can accrue, however, only if youth are participating, and the frequency, duration, and breadth of their participation matters. Clearly, efforts can be undertaken to encourage such participation.

While there are many ways for Extension professionals to envision their role in creating youth development programs in the after-school hours, one model receiving attention is what we call the *club-within-a-club*. In other words, the 4-H club operates within the structure of a community-based organization that manages an after-school program (Ferrari, 2002). This model works well when the goals of the two organizations are compatible and there is a shared sense of ownership.

This article describes the efforts of Ohio 4-H Youth Development (4-H) and the Boys & Girls Clubs of Columbus, Inc. (B&GCC) to explore such a program delivery model. These two organizations began working together in 2001 to build a long-term relationship. Given our organizations' well-known successes, the similarity in missions, and the fact that both have a significant community presence, it seemed only logical that the two organizations examine the development of a closer working relationship.

Purpose/Objectives

The study described here was undertaken to inform the continued development of the 4-H/B&GCC collaboration. We wanted to learn more about the feasibility of forming a long-term, well-integrated relationship between the two organizations. We did this by adopting a "learn by doing" approach; in other words, we proposed to learn about the inputs, outputs, and outcomes by actually implementing 4-H clubs within Boys & Girls Clubs' facilities. This stage of program development also has been referred to as "taking a test drive" (Banach & Gregory, 2001). Specifically, the study was designed to accomplish the following objectives:

1. Describe a 4-H club delivery model suited for after-school settings, specifically, the implementation of 4-H within Boys & Girls Clubs.
2. Describe the associated strengths and challenges of this model.
3. Determine keys to success and appropriate next steps.

Methods/Procedures

The focus of the investigation was on program implementation. To consider questions of program outcomes would not be appropriate at this stage of the program's development. As King, Morris, and Fitz-Gibbon (1987) have stated, "unless the programmatic black box is opened and its activities made explicit, the evaluation may be unable to identify strengths or suggest appropriate changes" (p. 9).

We determined that a qualitative design would provide the necessary insight into program implementation, particularly because individuals' perceptions were desired (Patton, 1987). If the collaboration was to be maintained over the long term, staff needed to view the programs as successful. This measure of success could not be based on an objective measure, but on the staff members' perceptions of the program. Furthermore, analysis of multiple data sources was considered necessary. Such data and method triangulation would provide an added degree of credibility (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002).

Data collection consisted of audio taped in-depth interviews with all B&GCC staff members ($N=7$). These staff members were selected because the primary responsibility for day-to-day implementation took place at the B&GCC facility. A graduate student who was not affiliated with either organization conducted the staff interviews. Qualitative data from these interviews were analyzed inductively in a line-by-line analysis using a process known as open coding (Straus & Corbin, 1990). Data were then categorized into relevant themes.

In addition, two university faculty members interviewed youth participants to gain their insight. These interviews provided a different perspective of program implementation. Data were also collected through participant observation; that is, the club adviser made notes regarding the evolution of the club experience. Notes from team meetings were reviewed as well. All research procedures and instruments received human subjects approval.

Findings and Discussion

First, the implementation of the program is described. Next, the presentation of the findings is organized under the major themes of benefits, challenges, and keys to success.

Program Description

To implement this project, B&GCC and 4-H shared the cost of a yearlong graduate student internship. Office space was provided at the B&GCC facility where programming occurred, which allowed a more thorough integration of staff and youth. Program materials were funded through the 4-H budget (e.g., curriculum guides, food for cooking projects, field trips) and program grants to the B&GCC (e.g., gardening supplies).

The intern served as the adviser for 4-H club meetings at two sites. The clubs met once a week during the school year and twice a week during the summer. Average attendance at the 4-H clubs

was approximately 12 youth per session during the school year and 20 youth per session during the summer. Ages ranged from six to 11, and the majority of members were female and African American.

The school-year program was scheduled in such a way that 4-H was offered at the same time as many recreation activities, and while this seemed to affect the number of boys who participated, many of the girls mentioned that the alternative to recreation was appealing to them. Because it was offered as a full-day program with more structured blocks of activity, the nature of the summer program allowed more youth to participate, especially boys. There was a designated time and location for club meetings. Visitors to these 4-H meetings would recognize the pledge and the clover as familiar 4-H symbols. They took roll, selected officers on a meeting-by-meeting basis, participated in special recognition such as Family Nights, had 4-H bulletin boards posted at each site, and created a club exhibit for the State Fair.

To continually address program implementation, team meetings with directors and program staff (i.e., B&GCC program staff and both state- and county-level Extension staff) from both organizations took place monthly. These meetings provided a chance to determine goals and objectives, report on their completion, and discuss obstacles and ways to address them.

Perceived Benefits

Both organizations perceived benefits. The location and nature of B&GCC programming attracted youth who did not have a previous history with 4-H. 4-H was able to reach an urban audience, the majority of whom were African American; these youth would not have participated in 4-H without this effort. Because of B&GCC's after-school operating hours, 4-H clubs were offered during the critical times when youth need positive youth development programming.

Furthermore, staff interviews supported the view that 4-H activities such as gardening provided B&GCC an additional, unique means to fulfill its mission. As one staff member noted, "We try to reach every kid. Not all of them are going to like basketball, we have about ten to twenty kids who really look forward to 4-H, it's their niche, it's what they like to do."

Participation in the 4-H club provided youth with exposure to new experiences. Another B&GCC staff member stated, "4-H is different, and offers us another avenue to fulfill our mission. It expands their horizons, and gives them options for things to do and interests to develop, rather than just hanging out." It was further noted that "the kids seem really excited about the types of activities that they are able to participate in."

Participation in the 4-H club gave youth opportunities for building relationships. In fact, it was clear that much of the success of this effort stemmed from the relationship that was established between the youth and the club adviser (the intern). Pittman (1992) noted that youth often define their attachment to a program or organization in terms of their relationship with a caring adult. The 4-H club adviser came to be known by many youth as "the 4-H lady," thus demonstrating the extent to which this person came to be identified with the activity.

This finding pointed to the importance of having the consistent presence of a 4-H club leader in the B&GCC facility, as opposed to a once-a-week visit. Who that individual is *does* make a difference. The characteristics of adults who work with youth and the roles they play in fostering relationships and creating group climate have been documented in previous research (Astroth, 1996; Gambone & Arbreton, 1997; Grossman et al., 2002; McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994; Rhodes, 2004; Yohalem, 2003). For example, Astroth (1996) found that beyond benefits from the relationship itself, youth gained more skills in groups where leaders were autonomy oriented compared to those with a control orientation. Thus, our observations provide a practical example of the role the adult leader plays in creating a successful experience.

The fact that the 4-H club was a separate group seemed to create a special sense of belonging among the members. B&GCC staff members reflected on the enthusiasm and special nature of the 4-H club that made it appealing to youth:

I think that the idea of a club, a membership kind of thing, . . . our B&GCC is a membership thing, but it's a big club. The idea of belonging to a group, a special group within the bigger B&GCC membership, seems to be attractive to the kids.

Saying the 4-H pledge was not a matter of because we've always done it that way, but because it helped to create connectedness to the group and to the ideals represented. Leading the pledge was always an honor. Officer roles were rotated weekly to give everyone a chance to participate and to alleviate issues created by a transient membership. The 4-H clover was recognized by members as their own symbol, proudly worn on 4-H/B&GCC t-shirts and displayed in their meeting room and bulletin board.

The long-term involvement 4-H provided fostered commitment, goal setting, and future orientation. The activities that the youth mentioned as enjoyable were those that involved participation over time. The garden project stands out in that regard. A staff member stated, "It helps them to set goals, the garden especially takes time to reach that goal." The other activity that figured prominently in youths' comments were the cooking experiences. Of the youth who reported talking with parents about 4-H, cooking was one of the top conversation topics (Hartzell,

2001). Both of these activities yielded tangible products, providing evidence of mastery. The intern noted that the summer programming, with its more frequent and longer blocks of program time and with its more consistent participation, made it easier to work toward program goals.

Challenges

Members of both organizations had to examine underlying assumptions regarding how we worked. The commitment of team members to overcoming obstacles and to establishing practices known to enhance positive youth development kept the efforts focused. Questions about issues such as consistent attendance, enrollment, parental involvement, appropriateness of paid staff as advisers, appropriateness of program guides and project books for groups, and expectations of participation at the fair were addressed.

For example, the expectation of consistent attendance was recognized as a strategy to develop belonging, create relationships, and foster achievement of goals. However, creating such a structure ran counter to Boys & Girls Clubs drop-in policy. In addition, other B&GCC activities that were offered during the same time as the 4-H club unknowingly created competition for members. With open discussion at team meetings, this situation was easily remedied.

Another challenge was working with existing 4-H project materials. Most project materials were written for individual use and with the assumption that follow-up activities would take place in the family setting. Because this club relied on a group format in the context of the after-school setting without relying on the participation of parents, very few existing guides were used, and many adaptations were made. Project activities had to balance being self-contained activities and taking into account the benefit of having longer-term program goals. At first glance, this is in contrast to the observation that projects that youth enjoyed were those that occurred over time. However, the population served by the B&GCC is rather mobile, and attendance was not always regular. Because the same youth may not attend the 4-H club meeting from week to week, short-term group projects that dealt with a common theme were ideal.

Invariably, one of the questions we are asked is: Do these youth go to the fair? Because of mobility issue mentioned above, members who attended the summer session were often different youth from those who initially enrolled during the school year. This timing conflicted with eligibility deadlines for county fair participation. Additionally, parent involvement was minimal, making transportation to the fair difficult, and individual projects close to impossible.

Instead, we sought other opportunities to showcase the club members' work and to provide them with recognition. For example, at the end of the 6-week food project, youth cooked a celebration dinner for invited family members. Perhaps one day youth will exhibit at the fair, but we did not consider this a necessary measure of the program's success.

Keys to Success

Before even agreeing to pursue the partnership, key players came together to agree on a set of goals and objectives that we were hoping to reach. Although not the only point of contact, these team meetings were essential for regular communication. Communication is crucial, as it has been identified as a significant variable influencing the success of collaborations (Jackson & Clark, 1996; Mancini & Marek, 1998). Both organizations had youth in the forefront, and wanted to be sure that the partnership would enable them to accomplish their mission and goals. We worked to ensure that our practices were aligned with principles of positive youth development (e.g., Hamilton, Hamilton, & Pittman, 2004).

We considered several aspects of this partnership to be our greatest strengths: shared vision, compatible missions, sense of commitment and ownership from both sides, and quality programming. This is consistent with the literature on collaborations (Mattesich & Monsey, 1992). It is likely that if even one of these assets were removed, 4-H clubs would not be thriving in the Boys & Girls Clubs environment.

The intern became fluent in the organizational cultures of both the B&GCC and 4-H, which enabled her to understand the functioning of both organizations and to address the challenges that occurred. The intern learned the basics of 4-H, as well as the many options for implementing 4-H, through participation in 4-H volunteer conferences, club advisor trainings, and training designed more specifically for after-school sites. Daily office and program hours, attendance at B&GCC staff meetings, and participation in B&GCC trainings allowed the intern to become immersed in both organizations to the extent that problems could be examined from both an insider and outsider perspective.

Conclusions and Implications

Overall, youth viewed their participation favorably. As well, B&GCC staff perceived that youth experienced several benefits from their participation. Upon culmination of the internship, key players agreed we had created a win/win situation and wanted to continue. This decision was based on an examination of the partnership's ability to implement sound principles of learning and positive youth development (e.g., Eccles & Gootman, 2002; National 4-H Impact Study, 2001).

The challenge remains in going to scale, that is, moving beyond a demonstration to the next phase of implementation. We have to show whether these benefits are an artifact of the particular individuals involved or if this partnership can continue even if the players change.

Funding and staff challenges are commonly reported obstacles to project survival (Marek, Mancini, Earthman, & Brock, 2003). Additions of new B&GCC sites, staff turnover in both organizations, and lack of funding have created some changes in the program structure. These are challenges are commonly experienced by youth programs (Gootman, 2000; Larner, Zippiroli, & Behrman, 1999; Miller, 2001). One of the new sites enjoys significant student involvement due to its proximity to the university (both an opportunity and a challenge). Providing in-service training and consistent staffing will be vital to the long-term sustainability of the partnership, and we are continuing to explore more and better ways to be successful in this aspect of programming.

Though they are not as frequent, the team meetings continue to take place, because they are undeniably one of the greatest strengths of this partnership. Each organization has something to offer and something to gain, making the collaboration truly mutually beneficial. We view this as "our" program--a sign that ownership has taken root. Its continued success, however, depends on using the information reported here to make refinements in the program (Banach & Gregory, 2001).

Another point to note is that qualitative data provided the richness necessary to understand the process of program implementation, collaboration, and outcomes. Other studies of youth programs also have found such an approach to be important (e.g., Astroth, 1996; Matysik, 2000; Paisley & Ferrari, in press; Ferrari & Turner, 2004).

As Extension professionals examine ways to address community needs for positive youth development and after-school programs, simply creating more programs is not necessarily the answer. Although starting 4-H clubs is a familiar part of the 4-H professional's job, establishing the club in an after-school program setting may present some new challenges. In a time when youth development professionals may be "torn" between serving traditional 4-H club programs and new initiatives that target specific youth audiences (McKee, Talbert, & Barkman, 2002), this programming model represents a way to bridge the two worlds.

If 4-H is to be "true to the original mission while changing our programs to meet new challenges that young people and the nation face" (Van Horn, Flanagan, & Thomson, 1998), then models such as that proposed here should continue to be explored. With increased focus on program delivery models in the after-school time (Ferrari, Linville, & Valentine, 2003), lessons learned from such partnerships must continue to be shared.

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