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Coalition Sustainability: Long-Term Successes & Lessons Learned

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Abstract

While most Cooperative Extension projects begin with worthy goals, to truly measure a project's long-term success, it is necessary to assess the project's impact over time. The purpose of this article is to analyze the sustainability and continued impact of a USDA funded youth-at-risk project coalition building project 10 years after the onset of the initial project and 5 years after cessation of funding. The lessons learned through the work of the coalitions involved in this project can provide insight into the planning and implementation of other projects and strategies that can be used to ensure long-term project sustainability.

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Introduction

Program sustainability is a key component of any successful project. Projects that introduce a new endeavor and have high visibility for a short period but fail to be sustainable after the initial thrust create a sense of resentment for local communities. Communities have become wary of participating in yet another opportunity that may be short lived. This can be especially true for grant-funded projects that have a definite timeline. Because of this, many programs require grantees to document sustainability beyond the life of funding. Project sustainability is a commendable goal, but it can be a very difficult part of the project.

Project sustainability was a major component of USDA youth-at-risk grants developed in the early 1990's. One of these USDA youth-at-risk projects was designed to develop local-level coalitions to address the needs of youth-at-risk in a rural midwestern state. This article describes the impact several of these coalitions are still making, 10 years after the onset of the initial project and 5 years after cessation of grant funding. The lessons learned through the work of these coalitions can provide insight into the planning and implementation of other projects and provide strategies that can be used to help ensure project sustainability.

Review of the Literature

Very little research has been done on the impact of community coalitions that have continued to work after initial funding has ceased. Public health professionals have been particularly vocal about the lack of research that has been conducted on the institutionalization of community action projects (Holder & Moore, 2000; Altman, 1995). Within Cooperative Extension, the 11 public policy education projects funded by W. K. Kellogg Foundation in the early 1990's provided an insightful lesson as to what sustainability really means. According to their report on lessons learned from these successful projects, those coalitions most likely to be sustained after the initial life of the project are ones that created project materials and developed new organizational legacies (i.e., changes in organizational structure, changes in how the work is done, and changes in prioritization

of program implementation) (Hahn, Greene, & Waterman, 1994).

Research related to community collaboration projects provides limited discussion of the merits of coalition sustainability. As a teaching tool for Cooperative Extension, a collaboration framework outlining the contextual and process factors that are inherent within collaborations was created, with sustainability listed as one of the process factors needed for building effective relationships that last (Bergstrom et al., 1995). Stevens and Marin-Hernandez (1999) highlight one community collaborative problem-solving lesson learned with a warning that processes isolated from local realities will not be sustained. In earlier research with the same Midwestern project, the federal expectation to sustain the program differed drastically from the local level desire to successfully complete an initial project and not worry about long-term sustainability (Stevens, Lodl, Rockwell, & Burkhart-Kriesel, 1994). With these thoughts in mind, the purpose of this article is to assess the sustainability of community coalitions 10 years after their initial onset and 5 years after funding ceased.

Project Description

KIDS' TEAM was a 5-year project of the University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension, funded by a grant from the CSREES. The goal of the project was to empower local communities to form coalitions that address the needs of youth and families at risk.

Through KIDS' TEAM, 56 community coalitions were developed in Nebraska's rural Third Congressional District. Each of these coalitions initially identified school-age child care as a high priority. To address this issue, KIDS' TEAM developed a program wherein volunteers planned and implemented positive group activities and supervision for school-age youth on school-release days, and as part of a before- and after-school program. Based on coalition successes with school-age child care programs, many went on to address more complex issues. For example, several coalitions developed parenting education programs. Others worked in the area of farm safety. Still others worked with tobacco and alcohol issues faced by teens.

While the successes of these coalitions were documented during the term of the project, in order to truly measure the impact of KIDS' TEAM, one must look at the long-term systemic change that transpired and the kinds of outcomes that are still occurring as a result of the project. While those coalitions associated with KIDS' TEAM had the advantages of being part of a statewide effort that had general goals and could provide seed money for the beginning of projects, their experiences can be used as ways to help better the process for other groups that are striving to do the same kinds of grass roots work

Methodology

In order to measure the long-term impact of KIDS' TEAM, individuals who participated on the original KIDS' TEAM leadership team were contacted during spring, 2000, 5 years after the end of funding and 10 years after the beginning of the project. To begin the process, these individuals were asked about the current status of their coalition, the long-term impact from the coalition, and effective processes the coalition had used to reach its goals.

Based on the responses from this focus group, the literature was reviewed to determine whether there was a connection between these themes and the previous research. The survey questions were developed based on these responses and further consultation with experts in the field. Leadership team members were reached via telephone and were asked to participate in a telephone interview. Nine individuals participated in the interviews, and information was gathered on 18 coalitions. Some of the interview participants had been involved with more than one coalition site.

Through the phone interviews, participants were asked if the coalitions that they had originally been working with were still active or if the coalitions had ceased. At this point in the interview, the participants were asked a series of open-ended questions. Those who responded that a coalition still existed were asked to discuss the current activity of the coalition, the impacts that the coalition has had on the community, the benefits of the coalition's activities, and reasons for success. Themes generated from these interviews were analyzed and compared with the literature. The following is a summary of the results of these interviews.

Results

Current Coalition Activities

Of those coalitions studied, the focus of most coalitions has expanded beyond the original goal of meeting the needs of children and families on school-release days. Only one group is still focused on this original goal.

One coalition closely resembles what was originally established through the KIDS' TEAM program. This group is led by members of the Family, Career and Community Leaders of America (FCCLA) at the local high school and adult volunteers from the community. The youth volunteers provide activities for children in the community on school-release days. These days include teacher work days, fall and spring breaks, and parent-teacher conferences.

Another coalition, the Family Resource Organization, exists to help minimize duplication of services among member agencies and organizations. The coalition explores new and different ideas and how they can be implemented in the county. The Family Resource Organization endorses activities that the member agencies conduct. The group has an office and a paid employee to oversee the activities of the group. If the group has an idea for a particular activity, the coordinator works with member agencies to find a sponsor for the event.

The Area Family Resource Network is another active coalition. This group recently printed the fourth edition of a directory of services for families in that particular county. The directories are distributed through the school system and member agencies. The group worked to establish a home-based head start program that employs three family educators. The Network has received recognition for the work that has been done to meet the needs of children and families in the area. The group has also worked to distribute information and conduct programs that address a variety of topics including child care, parenting, child abuse, and divorce. The coalition works to collaborate on meeting the needs of children and families in the county to maximize services without duplication.

In another community, the FAST Coalition sponsors a number of local programs in the community, such as an adult/youth mentor program. The FAST coalition has worked with the local court system to provide a divorce education program. The group is working with a behavioral services agency to pilot test a federal program that assists families in getting services from the community. The coalition also helps parents develop positive parenting and child care skills.

Another coalition has conducted two needs assessment studies over 4 years to identify training needs of educators and child care providers. As a result, the coalition has provided training programs in several areas, such as first aid, information on the basic development of children, and parenting education. The coalition has also conducted a needs assessment with local businesses to identify child care needs. As a result of this work, a new child care facility is being built. A mentor program has been established that pairs an experienced child care provider with a new provider to help facilitate positive care practices. The coalition coordinates the publication and distribution of a bimonthly newsletter that reaches 240 child care providers in the area. The coalition also sponsors mini-grants that are used to fund an annual early childhood education conference. The group also sponsor a Kids' Festival during the community's annual summer celebration.

Why Some Have Survived

While each of the functioning coalitions is carrying out programs specific to the local needs of their community, there are some common themes that help describe why they are still thriving. For example, most of the active coalitions have received outside funding over the past 5 years. This funding was cited as a key to success of the active coalitions. Three of the five active coalitions in this study were able to hire and support a paid coordinator through the grant funding received. All indicated that this played a big role in the success of the coalition.

When asked to share the impact of their coalition on the community, several similarities emerged for all of the coalitions. Following is a brief listing of the ideas shared:

1. The work of the coalition has made resources available in the community that had not been available before. Families are more aware of the services that are available for their use.
2. The work of the coalition keeps educators and child care providers aware of current issues regarding children and families.
3. The coalition allows individuals, agencies, and organizations to collaborate in an effort to maximize access to services and minimize duplication among the various member agencies.
4. The coalition has been together long enough to effectively identify current needs in the community and work to meet those needs.
5. The community has come together to support activities that meet the needs of children and families.
6. Some of the coalitions have received feedback that parents and families feel that they have benefited from the programs and resources made available through the coalition.

Finally, the subjects were asked to think about why the coalition has been successful. Several factors were identified. Though not all factors seemed to play a role in the success of each of the coalitions, the following factors seemed to be key to a successful coalition.

1. The coalition has a common goal to identify and meet the needs of families in the community.

2. The members feel a responsibility for the commitment that they have made to the coalition.
3. The coalition has been able to secure outside funding to make services available. Three of the five active coalitions have been able to afford to hire a paid coordinator, and this was identified as a very valuable factor in the success of these coalitions.
4. As the coalition experiences some early success of programs or activities, members gain the enthusiasm to work harder, thus creating a cycle of success.
5. The coalition has been recognized for its success. Some sources of recognition mentioned were articles in the local newspaper, recognition by the community, and identification through the Nebraska Good Beginnings program.

The KIDS' TEAM program appears to have helped to lay the early foundation for successful coalitions in these five communities. In general, the resources originally developed by the KIDS' TEAM project are being utilized in the work of the coalitions. For example, the curriculum box developed by the project and information concerning the needs of youth and families continue to be well received. One interview subject shared that organizations in her community had begun talking about forming a group and working together and that KIDS' TEAM acted as a catalyst to get them organized and functioning.

Each coalition is unique and works to meet the specific needs in their area. The individuals communicated the value of the collaboration among organizations and agencies. By working together, the coalition has been able to maximize services for children and families and raise awareness in the community of these services.

Unfortunately, some of the original coalitions have ceased. The subjects who answered that a coalition had discontinued were asked to share ideas for why this happened. One reason was that funding ran out, making it difficult to continue. Several coalitions relied on volunteer leadership, and burn-out played a role in the demise of the organized activity. In some cases, there was a lack of interest from the community and the activities were not well attended. These factors played a role in the discontinuation of the programs.

In most cases, the individuals indicated that KIDS' TEAM had been worthwhile in their communities. The original work of KIDS' TEAM helped to raise awareness of the current needs of children and families. The early coalition building helped to open the lines of communication and foster relationships among organizations that still exist even if the coalition does not. The resources and materials from the KIDS' TEAM program continue to be utilized with other programs through Cooperative Extension, child care, and education.

To summarize, KIDS' TEAM appears to have been successful at building and sustaining community coalitions. Five years after completion of the project, project participants were able to talk about the benefits of the program. Whether the coalitions are still active or not, the subjects shared positive feedback. KIDS' TEAM appears to have raised an awareness of current issues of children and families. The program helped to facilitate relationship building among organizations with a common goal to serve families. The active coalitions continue to serve families in Nebraska and appear to be a valuable asset in their communities.

Lessons Learned

While it is good to know that KIDS' TEAM was successful, it is even more important to understand the KIDS' TEAM coalition building process so that it can be applied to other projects. Based on observations of those coalitions that have successfully sustained themselves and long-term study of a variety of coalition success and failures, the following lessons can be learned.

1. Project sustainability must be a key part of the project from the very beginning.
2. Conducting valid needs assessments is vital to giving the coalition and its work credibility. This also gives the coalition a true sense of accomplishment when the project is completed and adds to the likelihood of the coalition continuing its efforts.
3. Those coalitions that bring together a wider variety of entities that encompass broader community needs prove to be more valued and tend to sustain. For example, county-wide or multi-county coalitions are often more effective as their efforts aren't in competition with each other.
4. Statewide or even national cooperation of agencies can serve as a model for local level coalition building and sustenance.

5. The most successful coalitions are those that begin their work with a specific goal for their first project. This goal can serve as the catalyst for coalition formation and work.
6. Communication among coalition members is key. For example, regular newsletters, in-person meetings, conference calls, annual directories of services, etc., serve to coordinate activities/events of the cooperating members.
7. The coalition is more likely to be successful when it seeks to minimize duplication of services and coordinates the efforts among agencies. This is especially true in areas that are sparsely populated and have minimal resources.
8. Coalitions most likely to remain a vital force in the community are those where someone, either a paid staff member or a staff member from one of the partnering agencies, has the responsibility of keeping the coalition functioning.
9. Youth membership on coalitions is essential to coalition longevity. Through encouraging youth input into project planning and using youth volunteers to help carry out project goals, all members of the community feel an ownership to the coalition and its work.
10. Coalitions that sustain themselves become skilled at securing funding. This funding can be in the form of federal, state, local or private grants, cash donations by local businesses, or in-kind contributions.

While many of these lessons appear to be common sense, using them as guidelines when working with coalitions can help to build more permanence into groups that might otherwise meet for a specific purpose and then disband. The lessons learned through the KIDS' TEAM process mirror and expand upon those identified by the Kellogg evaluation report (Hahn, Greene, & Waterman, 1994). With the insight gleaned from these two projects, and others like it, future coalition development can be expedited and enhanced in such a way that grass roots efforts truly can be successful.

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