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Short-Term Interventions for Long-Term Needs: The Challenge of Bridging Youth and Community Development

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Abstract

The Mill City/Gates Youth Development Project operated as a youth-at-risk program in a timber-dependent community during the timber crisis of the early 1990's. Evaluations indicate the youth activities were effective. Community support structures created by the project continue to operate 5 years after the end of funding, indicating a successful institutionalization of this component of the project. Although projects like this can have tremendous impacts with short-term youth programs, they are not sustainable when the community lacks the resources for their continuation. This project demonstrates investments in community capacity building have long-term impacts and are crucial for communities to support youth and families.

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Overview

If you want to know if I think you've done a good job, I think you guys have. And you're probably the saving grace for a lot of kids in this area that would have gotten themselves in a lot of trouble. At least they had something to go to or something to look forward to. . . And they didn't have that before.

Mother of at-risk youth, Mill City, Oregon, 1994

In the midst of the timber crisis of the early 1990s, the authors embarked on a project to create a youth development program in a community besieged with high unemployment and the gloom associated with the threat to a way of life. While funded as a youth development initiative through the USDA Youth-and-Families-At-Risk Program, the project's objectives related to development of community capacity to meet the needs of youth--a decidedly community development focus. Bridging the demand for short-term outcomes with long-term capacity development needs of the community became a key challenge to the project team and community leaders involved in the project.

For 5 years the project nimbly adjusted to changes in the community, as well as the vicissitudes of working within a university system and the requirements of the federal funding provider. The project ultimately moved a segment of the Mill City/Gates community from "bad" to "better." The project was able to accomplish:

1. Intervening into what was a serious situation for youth. For 5 years the project regularly offered worthwhile activities that built important life skills.
2. Developing a community infrastructure to provide long-term support for youth and families. This legacy of the project has continued until the present--over 5 years after funding for the project ended.

This article gives a brief overview of the Mill City/Gates Youth Development Project, reviews some of its successes and challenges, and discusses the implications of both.

Situation

Mill City and Gates are two small, moderately isolated, timber-dependent towns located east of Salem, Oregon. Situated adjacent to one another, the towns form a community that shares shopping, schools, a tradition of independence, and a commitment to hard work in the forest or in lumber mills.

When a reduction in timber harvest on public lands was implemented in the late 1980s, lumber mills began to close, and the unemployment rate climbed. By 1990, the National Association of Counties designated Mill City and Gates as one of 10 "endangered" communities in the western United States (Jackson & Gustafson, 1990).

The Mill City/Gates Youth Development Project began during the spring of 1991 as one of the Youth-At-Risk programs funded through the USDA Extension Service under its "Building and Developing Coalitions" category. As the project began, these significant risk factors for youth and families were identified.

- **High unemployment.** Unemployment was high, with the majority of the population depending directly or indirectly on the timber and wood products industry for their livelihood. During 1990, the unemployment rate for Mill City was 13.2% and for Gates was 8.3% (Weber & Bowman, 1999).
- **Poverty.** Poverty affected many households. During 1990, the percentage of the population living in poverty was 14.3% for Mill City and 16.7% for Gates (Weber & Bowman, 1999).
- **Substance abuse.** The local crisis center reported that it was witnessing an increase in substance abuse with both adults and youth (C. Girod, personal communication, April, 1991).
- **Children in crisis.** The local crisis center reported a steady increase in the number of "children-in-crisis" calls, many involving physical abuse (C. Girod, personal communication, April, 1991).
- **Few youth development opportunities.** There were no significant youth-serving organizations or businesses in the area.
- **Lack of social services.** The community is awkwardly located on the boundary spanning two counties. As a result, county health, youth and other services were disjointed and often inadequate.

School counselors characterized area youth as having a sense of hopelessness about their future. A sharp rise in stress within families coupled with a lack of positive activities for youth placed the children of Mill City and Gates significantly at-risk.

Formation of the Mill City/Gates 4-H Coalition was a first step for the project. The "Coalition," as it was generally known, included parents and representatives from schools, churches, the local crisis center, and the U.S. Forest Service. Grounded in methods outlined by Bogenschneider and associates (1991), the Coalition resolved to enhance community protective factors and reduce community risk factors for youth.

With the community gripped by the timber crisis, Coalition members felt that the project should provide positive alternatives for youth as soon as possible. In addition, the project required quantifiable results for each year in order to continue funding. Middle school youth were the first group targeted for the program. After-school hours and summer were identified as critical periods when youth development activities could be beneficial. A comprehensive program was developed targeting specific time periods and included:

- An After-School Program scheduled for most school days and on other weekdays when school was not in session.
- A 10-week Summer Enrichment Program led by teen staff members.
- Volunteer-led programs such as trail-building and enrichment classes, as well as traditional 4-H club programs.

- Family activities such as campouts, parenting classes, and retreats.
- Evening programs consisting of entertainment such as dances and video nights.
- A Youth Advisory Board that planned and led activities for other youth.
- The activities were designed to build life skills. The project used material by Gobeli (1991) and curricula such as *Leadership Skills You Never Outgrow* (Munson & Zwilling, 1993) as a foundation. These life skills guided the design of project activities:
 - Understanding myself and my values;
 - Communicating and relating to others;
 - Problem-solving and decision-making;
 - Acquiring, analyzing, and using data
 - Managing resources; and
 - Working with others (Gobeli, 1991:4).

The Coalition also provided programs for high-risk high school youth. Referred by the local sheriff's department and the high school counselor, these youth completed a 10-week outdoor challenge program and received high school credit for their participation. The program had a low student-to-instructor ratio and included a high number of hours devoted to one-on-one mentoring.

Results

The Youth Development Program

Through the course of the project, over 75% of the targeted middle school age audience participated in one or more programs. During the fourth year of the project, a graduate research assistant collected and compiled evaluation data on the effectiveness of the project's youth development programs (Gilden, 1995). The data showed the following.

A survey of teachers indicated positive improvements in communication skills, getting along with other youth, confidence, and self-esteem by youth involved in the project. In addition, teachers confirmed the project was reaching at-risk youth. Their comments included:

- *I believe the biggest improvement I've seen has been an improvement in self esteem...I look at changes in [some] kids...and I think there are life-changing improvements.*
- *It has reached kids that were not reached by the schools or by parents.*

A survey of youth involved in the program indicated:

- 76% felt that involvement with the program had changed them in a positive way.
- When youth were asked if they were now more, the same, or less likely to carry out certain tasks related to life skills than before becoming involved in 4-H, respondents said they were more likely to:
 - Teach others how to do something (79%)
 - Set goals for themselves (65%)
 - Save money to buy something or go somewhere (65%)
 - Stand up for themselves (60%)
 - Take responsibility when things go wrong (60%)
 - Try something they had never tried before (60%)
 - Finish doing something they had started (53%)

Detailed case studies were conducted for three participants. Interviews with the youth, their parents, and volunteers who worked with them indicated the project was having a positive impact. Comments from the case studies included:

- *I know how to agree with people now. I know how to settle arguments better 'cause before I'd be throwing books and hitting people, and now I'd be talking it out and settle it better.* Middle School Age Youth
- *. . . He got grounded and the only thing he could do [was allowed to do] for a while was anything to do with the 4-H. I can't say 4-H did this one certain thing, you know, but it was a good influence on him totally, and his brother, and a few other kids that I've noticed that come over. I think 4-H is one of the best things that could happen to Mill City. I really do.* Mother of Middle School Age Youth

Short-term results for the high school age participants were also positive. Eighteen high-risk youth participated in the outdoor challenge program. Fourteen youth completed the program.

- A survey of teachers and the high school counselor indicated that 70% (10 individuals) of the participants who completed the program showed positive changes in classroom behavior and an improvement in grades. Two of these individuals reportedly had "life changing" improvements in behavior.

- The high school counselor and teachers indicated four individuals probably would not have graduated from high school had they not participated in the program.

Although these programs were highly effective and provided a positive alternative for youth during the five years the community was in its greatest period of crisis, they were too expensive for the community to maintain when grant funding ended.

The Coalition

Sustaining the benefits of the project beyond the 5-year federal funding commitment was a major goal of the Coalition as well as an expectation of the USDA. During the last 2 years of the project, county officials began working with the Coalition to enhance services for area children and families. The Coalition collaborated with the county government, and the project "loaned" its director to help form the Santiam Canyon Youth and Families Alliance (SCYFA). Representing the six communities in its region, SCYFA created an infrastructure that continues to address the needs of youth and families.

In its first year, SCYFA secured funding for staff and opened the "Canyon Family Resource Center" that provided information and referral for families, as well as office space for social service professionals. SCYFA has six standing committees that focus on local issues including:

- Family Resource Center
- Youth activities and development
- Child care
- Transportation
- Parenting support
- Cultural diversity

Since 1994, SCYFA has been an important entity in the area. Through the Santiam Canyon Family Center, it coordinates local delivery of services to residents. The Center now shares offices with the local Chamber of Commerce and the North Santiam Economic Development Corporation, indicating the formal recognition and institutionalization of a program with a grassroots beginning.

Lessons and Recommendations

The project was never smooth sailing, and many lessons were learned. The following are some of the challenges encountered. The responses serve as recommendations for similar programs.

Outsiders

During the timber crisis, residents of Mill City and Gates were suspicious of people from outside their community, particularly people from government agencies. This issue was dealt with by having the project director work and live in the community to build rapport. Also, the cadre of key community members and the non-threatening reputation of the 4-H program opened doors for the project. Once the project had a track record of providing positive youth activities, it became a valued part of the community.

Approach to Youth Development

At a time when most families were preoccupied with maintaining their households, the traditional club-based approach to 4-H programming and its high time commitment for adult volunteers and youth simply would not draw adequate participation. The strategy instead was to offer high numbers of short-term programs based on sound youth development principles. Accordingly, there were activities to suit most interests and they were offered at times youth were available.

This approach also fit well with the varying levels of commitment and the somewhat transitory lifestyle some families were experiencing. In similar settings, efforts to reach a large youth audience of various ages, ethnicities, and income levels, the focus should be on youth development instead of strictly the 4-H club model. Offering a wide variety of youth development programs (including 4-H clubs as one component) appeals to a wider variety of families

Turnover of Volunteers

While there were over 90 volunteers associated with the project by the fourth year of the project, job changes, illness, and other factors caused some key volunteers to leave the project. Their absence resulted in temporary or, in some instances, long-term loss of program segments and overall project momentum. Although the community included more than its share of highly talented people, its small population limited the size of the talent pool and hindered the ability to routinely recruit additional key volunteers. Unfortunately, this situation simply had to be endured.

Turnover of Key School District Personnel

The school district occupied a crucial position in the success of the project and the health of the community. When key personnel, such as superintendents, principals, counselors, and teachers, left the community for new jobs, their replacements were either very enthusiastic about their community involvement or did not share the same interest in the community as their predecessors. Consequently, access to facilities and collaboration between the school district and

the project grew and diminished with staff changes. Key volunteers regularly lobbied the school board on behalf of the project, but these changes were something to which the project simply adjusted.

Year-to-Year Funding and the USDA's Demand for Short-Term Outcomes

Stevens and associates (1994) noted differences in expectations at the local level versus the federal level for USDA Youth-At-Risk projects. The experience of the Mill City project was consistent with their observation. The USDA seemed to have conflicting demands of short-term impacts along with long-term project institutionalization. The first 2 years of the project were funded only 1 year at a time. Renewal of funding was based solely on short-term outcomes. This forced the project to focus initially on producing quick quantitative data such as numbers of participants rather than on long-term community building. It was not until the beginning of the third year that the USDA was able to commit to 3 years of secure funding.

The situation created by the need for short-term outcomes also forced the use of funds for programs that the community could not sustain when the project ended. The authors maintain that the project would have been even more effective had the same budget been spread out over 10 years rather than 5 years. In similar situations, resources should be carefully budgeted toward short-term intervention programs for youth and long-term community building, with attention to creating the types of youth programs that are sustainable for communities.

Conclusion

The Mill City/Gates Youth Development Project took place in a community experiencing the turmoil of change. The project was guided by a coalition of interested parents and key community leaders resolved to enhance community protective factors and reduce risk factors. It accomplished this through offering youth development activities and creating an infrastructure to address the needs of youth and families.

Though the youth development activities responded to an important community need, they ultimately ended in the absence of funding. On the other hand, SCYFA, the alliance representing the communities of the region, is fully institutionalized and continues to support young people and their families. The project demonstrates that investments in community capacity building are worthwhile and are necessary in order to have lasting benefits.

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