Abstract: 4-H has long emphasized the importance of civic engagement and community service for positive youth development (PYD). This idea has gained renewed interest in recent years as youth development research highlights contribution to others as a main outcome of PYD programs (Lerner & Lerner, 2006). Given this, more emphasis is being placed on creating models for effective youth community engagement. In 2005, the Kellogg Foundation outlined eight pathways for youth civic engagement, including youth research and evaluation. This pathway possesses the potential to be an ideal fit for 4-H programming, yet few models exist for implementation.

To address this need, 4-H faculty members at Oregon State University developed and pilot-tested a curriculum, Participatory Evaluation with Youth: Building Skills for Youth Community Action (Arnold & Wells, 2007). The curriculum follows the social inquiry cycle, providing training activities for each step. A theme throughout the curriculum is youth-adult partnerships, a critical ingredient for successful youth community engagement.

This article describes curriculum content, provides an example of one team's journey from training to a completed community action project (CAP), and offers comments on success.
Participatory Evaluation and Youth

Participatory evaluation is hands-on by nature, emphasizing purposeful use of research results for community enhancement. The focus is on strengthening communities through empowerment of stakeholders (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998). Participatory evaluation is based upon the philosophy that program participants play an important role in evaluating educational programs and is commonly used in community development and education. Participatory evaluation seeks to be practical, useful, formative, and empowering (Nieto, Schaffner, & Henderson, 1997).

Involving youth in planning and conducting program evaluations allows youth to develop social research skills and social capital (Sabo Flores, 2008). The participatory experience also allows youth to develop five key psychological, social, and behavioral characteristics of positive youth development: confidence, competence, caring, character, and connection (Lerner & Lerner, 2006).

Preparing Youth for Community Action

The curriculum developed by Arnold and Wells (2007) prepares youth for community action through hands-on training. It involves youth-adult partnerships and is built around the steps of the evaluation cycle that include: organizing a participatory research team; framing research issues; developing research questions; gathering, organizing, analyzing and interpreting data; sharing research results; and implementing an action plan based on those results.

Teams are most successful when adults participate in training activities along with youth, solidifying the team's youth-adult partnership. Adults play an active role in the process, guiding and encouraging youth. Receptivity of authority figures can play a central role in youth efficacy and engagement (Brennan, Barnett, & Baugh, 2007). During the training, teams learn how to identify community issues, participate in a mock community forum, practice forum moderating and recording, analyze forum data, and learn how to communicate results. Following the training, youth-adult teams return to their communities, plan and host a community forum, and then plan and implement a CAP based on forum information.

Youth Community Action: Preparing for the 2008 U.S. Olympic Trials

In February 2008 seven youth-adult teams participated in a 3-day intensive curriculum training. After the training, the Lane County team held several meetings to discuss marketing, planning, and implementing a community forum. The team decided to focus the forum on beautifying the city of Eugene, Oregon in preparation for the 2008 U.S. Olympic Track and Field Trials.

The forum was promoted on the Olympic Trials Web site and via informational flyers, emails, and personal invitations to attend the event. At the forum, ideas were generated for beautifying the community, including cleaning parks, removing graffiti, and enhancing landscaping. After analyzing the data, the team decided to beautify the Lane County Events Center. The center anticipated 75,000 visitors coming to Eugene for the trials. The team contacted the center and offered their services, and the action project was launched, resulting in over 50 community members participating.
Impact of Community Action Projects

The benefits of the forum went beyond helping the community; it enhanced life skills in youth participants. One participant shared, "It meant a great deal to be a part of a statewide community action training. We left feeling more confident, and with improved communication skills." Involving youth in participatory evaluation empowers youth by developing leadership, communication, and civic engagement skills (Sabo Flores, 2008). Youth who participate in these projects infuse the community with fresh, new, dynamic energy and perspectives. Research findings indicate that civically active youth present the opportunity for long-term involvement and ownership of community and Extension programs. (Brennan, Barnett, & Baugh, 2007).

Comments on Successful Community Action Projects

A positive CAP has the potential to motivate youth to continue their community involvement. One youth participant reported,

My favorite thing about the forum was seeing our hard work pay off in the final project. I was gratified when over 50 people volunteered for the project. Even if just a few people take time to organize a forum, it's a great way to bring the community together. You impact a lot more people than you think.

The Participatory Evaluation with Youth: Building Skills for Community Action curriculum offers an opportunity for Extension to build community partnerships with organizations such as Commissions on Children and Families, Chambers of Commerce, County Visitor and Tourism Convention Bureaus, and service clubs (Rotary, Lions, Kiwanis, Active 20/30 clubs, etc.). A CAP can begin by contacting an organization and expressing a desire to collaborate. It doesn't need to be complex or require an extended period of time.

Conclusion

The Participatory Evaluation with Youth: Building Skills for youth Community Action curriculum provides a solid, innovative model from which to construct meaningful community action projects. More information about the curriculum can be found at: <http://oregon.4h.oregonstate.edu/program-research-and-evaluation-4h>. CAPs offer opportunities to create environments in which youth and adults work together, as equal partners, to positively impact their communities.

In addition to developing social inquiry and life development skills, youth get a chance to direct their energies towards civic engagement projects that they themselves identify, analyze, and implement. Extension staff who work in the areas of positive youth development, community development, capacity building, and evaluation can benefit from engaging in participatory evaluation with youth and community action projects. The purposeful use of research as well as opportunities for both individual and community enhancement make CAPs a worthwhile endeavor. Future research could explore the role that participatory evaluation and community action plays in motivating youth to remain active in civic engagement.

References


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