

Engaging Youth, Serving Community: Social Change Lessons from a 4-H Rural Youth Development Program

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I. INTRODUCTION

Social change targeted at empowering youth requires youth and adults to work together as equals. Youth-adult partnerships create a platform to amplify youth voices. To succeed, youth-adult partnerships must be built on open communication and equal voice. By providing opportunities for youth to develop their voices and build positive relationships with adults, youth-adult partnerships help youth see themselves as competent individuals who can contribute to decisions that impact their communities while helping them develop leadership skills and improve their self-esteem. Such partnerships also help adults gain leadership skills and experience a renewed sense of energy and commitment to their work. Organizations benefit because youth bring fresh perspectives to decision-making processes. Communities are rejuvenated through youthful energy, and when fresh perspectives of societal issues provide new solutions. For such initiatives to succeed, public stakeholders must recognize the importance of youth participation. 4-H has developed an initiative that focuses on exactly this issue.

4-H is the largest youth development organization in the United States, with more than 6 million youth participants; 514,000 volunteers; 3,200 professionals; and over 70 million alumni. 4-H engages youth from elementary through high school in experiential learning activities through research-driven programming. The experiential learning model has five steps: experience and discover; share results; process information; generalize about the experience; and, apply to other areas. In a well-designed experiential learning model, youth are fully engaged in learning processes. Four basic youth needs are met by 4-H: Mastery, Belonging, Generosity, and Independence.

Engaging Youth, Serving Community (EYSC) is a 4-H program funded through the National 4-H Council and the United States Department of Agriculture/National Institute of Food and Agriculture (USDA/NIFA). EYSC is designed to empower communities to involve youth as partners with adults in decision-making and governance. From 2006 to 2010, EYSC included 18 land-grant university projects representing 17 states. Each university worked with at least five rural underserved communities with a population of 10,000 people or less, reaching over 90 different communities during the five years.

Using a case study, this paper shares six broadly applicable lessons learned through the EYSC program. Based on evaluation and understanding of the EYSC experience, it highlights examples of how youth-adult partnerships can promote social change and civic engagement.

II. CASE STUDY: GOT FARMS!

The community of Bethel, in Oxford County, Maine, received funding through EYSC to

take action on issues that can positively impact rural communities. When the program started, the EYSC youth-adult partnership project team, comprised of 15 youth and four adults, named itself “Got Farms!” The team was interested in issues related to food security, quality, and cost – concerns that both youth and adults expressed. Its first activity was to join with a local food group’s public issues forum to identify local citizens specific concerns regarding food security and learn how to plan and implement a youth-facilitated forum in the future. 95 people attended this forum; their top concerns involved raising local foods, raising healthy organic foods, and promoting community awareness of the health benefits of eating locally grown organic fruits and vegetables.

After holding the forum, the team began by building and planting eight raised gardening beds and repairing the school’s greenhouse – adding solar panels and a 24-hour live webcam. The youth identified partner organizations (local businesses and a local food group) and recruited other youth and adults to help with these projects. While at the forum, they had built a relationship with a group of elders in the school district’s adult education program called Senior College. The Senior College elders worked with a small group of the youth to keep the garden beautiful and productive during the summer. The partnership with the Senior College and the adult local foods alliance enabled the EYSC project to be sustainable. The youth expanded their worldview through these relationships, which went beyond their peer- and school-based social circles. The team then partnered with a local foods group to plan and implement a community-wide Foods Harvest Festival in the fall. Their goal was to cook together, see each other’s gardens, and provide education on the importance of growing and eating locally grown organic food and mitigating food insecurity in their own backyards. The event was attended by 110 people and included live music and displays from the Got Farms! Garden and other gardens and community farms from around the state. They took a tour of gardens around the state and at the end of the festival, the team cooked dinner for attendees using local vegetables and fruits.

As a result of their interest in food, the forums, partnering, the activities, and reflection on their service-learning experiences, the youth involved gained knowledge, skills, and abilities not just from one event, but also from the whole process. The Got Farms! team conducted an informal reflective evaluation process with participants, community members, and local businesses. Youth and adults increased their knowledge and skills in various areas, adults view youth as valuable assets, and community awareness of the importance of healthy eating has increased. There is a website dedicated to the project and to community education on healthy eating: <http://gotfarms.wordpress.com/> (see “About this Project” for history and details).

III. KEY LESSONS LEARNED

1. Youth become more engaged when their voices are valued in identifying and

working towards a collective goal. Youth need a voice in choosing activities and goals, and making and carrying out plans. When adults predetermine a project goal and how to reach it, youth will become disengaged or simply move into the mode of carrying out lower-level assignments. While they will get the job done, they lack true engagement.

To engage youth, EYSC projects such as Got Farms! hold a youth-facilitated public issues forum/town hall to identify priority community issues. Having youth lead these forums shows community members in attendance that youth have passion for working to resolve local issues. As described in the Got Farms! case study, a group of youth and adults were concerned about food security, cost, and quality. EYSC youth worked with adults in the first year of the project to learn how to plan and implement forums. A forum held during the second year was jointly led by the youth and adults. By the third year, the youth planned and facilitated their own forum – which leveraged an \$8,000 grant for their local foods cooking project. They used an open space forum process, which involved participants suggesting issues to drive discussion and forming small groups to work on specific topics. This process results in greater networking and better project design.

2. Youth and adults must work together as equal partners, with roles and responsibilities for youth and adults clearly delineated. In youth-adult partnerships, both youth and adults must respect and value one another’s ideas and contributions. When either youth or adults dominate a group, it is less effective at identifying issues, developing and implementing plans, and evaluating project successes and failures. Youth must be willing to accept responsibility and decision-making power, and adults must be willing to share responsibility and power. For example, youth should be involved in budgeting and evaluating—roles often saved for adults—and serve in roles that are as critical to project completion as adults’ roles.

Team members should work collaboratively to clarify the roles of youth and adults. Such clarity will help encourage youth action in the community and reduce the likelihood of “adultism” – namely, the assumption that adults are better than youth.

Through project activities, the youth involved in Got Farms! learned to collaborate with the other adult EYSC team members and diverse community members to identify local issues and implement strategies to address those issues. As mentioned, youth facilitated community forums, identified and built relationships with collaborators, recruited others to work on projects, and fully participated with adults in project activities.

3. Training on the youth-adult partnership process is a must for all team members. Few youth or adults are skilled at working as part of a multi-generational team. Adults are used to telling youth what to do and youth are used to doing what adults say. Thus, youth and adults must both learn various techniques for being intentional about valuing and

ensuring equal roles for both groups. These techniques can be as simple as adults not interrupting youth when they are speaking and youth not becoming defensive when adults critique their ideas.

EYSC has embraced a train-the-trainer model for youth-adult partnership teams in social and community organizing. From 2006 to 2010, EYSC funded projects through 18 universities in 17 different states. In each state, there were at least five community project sites. A national EYSC training was held for the state-level project director and small youth-adult leadership teams from each of the state sites. The national training focused on youth-adult partnerships, a train-the-trainer approach to the EYSC rural youth development and 4-H programming model, and program evaluation. These smaller community leadership teams recruited additional local team members and then trained the new members in the programming model. This training model allowed youth to serve as trainers for adults, thus elevating their contribution to and role on the team.

4. It is important to obtain adequate resources. To achieve sustainability, organizations must work to obtain adequate resources (e.g., financial, human, physical, etc.) to support development of the youth, the project, and the community over a three-to-five year period of time. This does not mean that large grants must be secured; instead it is one more way for youth and adults to work together to find partnering organizations and/or donations. Volunteer time is as important as funding in the success of a community-based project. Acquiring such resources from within the community strengthens broad commitment and support for any current and future projects and thus contributes to sustainability.

Each EYSC community had an annual budget of \$2,000 for five years; this funding needed to cover forum and action plan implementation expenses. Because this is not a large budget, youth-adult partnership teams worked to find additional resources (actual and in-kind) to supplement their activities. Community sites used EYSC funds to leverage other resources, both in real dollars and in-kind sources. For example, in its first year, the Got Farms! team raised \$6,800 in cash and in-kind donations of facility use, topsoil, fencing, etc. Youth and adult volunteers (including the Got Farms! youth-adult partnership team) contributed over 5,000 hours in the first year to project activities (building gardens, weeding, watering, repairing the greenhouse). Based on the Independent Sector's Value of Volunteer Time guidelines, the value of these hours at the average national rate of \$20.25 was \$101,250. Across all 90 different EYSC sites over five years of funding, a total of \$289,753 was reported in cash and additional grants, while in-kind contributions of building space, transportation, supplies, and food in the amount of \$1,758,038 were reported. Volunteer time value was calculated at nearly \$8.5 million.

5. Reflection is key for program improvement and sustainability. It is important to think back on, share, and generalize actions in order to apply lessons learned into a new

round of action. EYSC teams were trained in an experiential learning action cycle. Teams also conducted evaluation to see where improvement was needed and where successes occurred. Documented success can lead to more funding and sustainability.

All teams used a set of common tools to ensure data could be combined across all project sites. Youth and adult EYSC team members completed surveys to measure leadership skills, confidence, and leadership activities (e.g., teaching others, acting as a mentor, planning learning activities). Youth and adult representatives of the EYSC team and community members in each individual community site completed an open-ended survey to indicate whether they accomplished the outcomes stated in their project proposals and provided details through comments. The principal investigator for each state's project was required to complete a year-end output measure report summarizing data such as cash and in-kind contributions, participant demographics, collaborations, volunteer hours, etc.

Some sites used additional evaluation techniques to collect data specific to their project. For example, Got Farms! had reflective sessions during team meetings, community forum work, and discussions with sponsors. Evaluation results showed that youth increased their knowledge about soil and plant science, organic gardening, and the health and wellness benefits of organic foods. They also learned to use their “voice” in expressing ideas, build confidence, and learned how to be equal partners with adults in community development work. Adults now see youth as valuable community assets and understand the value of youth participation in educating the community and building a model site that others can replicate. At a community level, awareness of the importance of healthy eating has grown.

6. Be patient! Building successful youth-adult partnerships, true youth engagement, and community change take time. We are all anxious to get started on a project and finish it, but establishing relationships, a key step to developing trust, is often overlooked in the zeal to get started. These relationships are important to the development of the youth-adult partnership as well as among collaborating organizations.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The Engaging Youth, Serving Community project, funded through National 4-H Council and USDA/NIFA, can serve as a model for how youth and adults work together for civic engagement and social change. We have shared lessons and examples throughout this paper that other organizations—small or large—could use in developing their own youth-adult partnerships.

As described earlier, youth, adults, organizations, and communities all experience the benefits of youth-adult partnerships. While the issues forums and community action plans have immediate benefits for local communities in creating change, the EYSC program also

effects long-term change by developing leadership skills that youth-adult team members will to apply to other settings and community concerns in the future. The projects increase economic opportunities and sustainability and improve quality of life in rural communities through enhanced human, social, civic, natural, financial, cultural, and built capitals. Youth engagement in civic affairs establishes a life-long pattern of service to others and communities. As one participant stated:

Community leaders have become more accepting of youth in that there are more youth serving on various committees and boards in our community. . . . EYSC played a major role in proving to community leaders that youth do have interests, talents and ideas that they want to share and projects that they want to undertake. I believe our group demonstrated that the level of responsibility a group of youth can have towards carrying out a program can be unwavering when they have had input and their ideas have been heard and implemented.”

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