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Youth Development Model That Yields Best Results

Activities that foster positive youth development form the core of most park and recreation programs. Whether your organization is seeking to start new programs, or improve existing ones, it is important to make sure they are directly influenced by the ideas, interests, and opinions of the youth they serve. In an interview, Summer Thommen, an organizational development consultant who specializes in youth development, suggests how staff can work together with youth to develop or improve their programs and activities.



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Customary Model

Summer Thommen points out that youth programs typically follow one of three models. In the first model, a traditional one, young people are served by a program that is completely designed, run, and evaluated by adults. Youth participate in the programs offered, but their opinions are rarely solicited. Most of these programs have a set organizational structure and have been run successfully for many years.

This model is very simple. Kids are supervised and kept safe by program staff in designated activity areas. These programs are structured around a conventional framework that is not directly influenced by the values, opinions, creativity and ideas of the youth involved with the program. Many of the programs do little to help youth develop real leadership skills or explore new interests. Programs that follow this model may find it hard to recruit and retain participants because adults may not understand how to make the program appealing to young people. These programs may lose many creative opportunities or new elements suggested by youth.

Thommen points out, “Adults with resistance to change need to get more exposure. It’s called exposure learning - getting out of your comfort zone. Young people can do that for adults.”

Blended Model

The second program model takes a blended traditional and youth-centered approach. In this model, youth not only participate in the program activities, but their opinions and ideas are solicited as a way to get another perspective on the program. While this model is adult-driven, the adults are conscious of the need to listen to youth, and then use their ideas and opinions to influence the program design or to offer new activities. Staff working under this model use informal methods to gather information from program participants, but it may not happen on a regular basis. In this model, many elements of program and activity design have been directly influenced by the youth they serve, creating an environment where young people’s needs can better be met, and where

they feel their opinions and ideas matter to the adults running the program. Thommen explains that while this model is influenced by youth, it does not necessarily help kids develop real leadership skills or establish a distinct partnership between the participants and the staff.

Youth Development Model

The third, and most effective, model of youth programming (with the direct intention of attracting, retaining, and developing young people) provides frequent structured opportunities for kids to evaluate the program in a way that makes them feel both safe and an important part of the program. Thommen found that programs she has evaluated which use this model are the most successful at attracting and retaining youth as well as giving young people a real opportunity to develop the skills to emerge as confident community leaders.

In these programs, young people participate in youth advisory boards, are involved with event and activity planning, and have formal opportunities to evaluate both the program and staff. Providing a more consistent and structured way of gathering information from program participants can help programmers get a better understanding of what is working as well as identify opportunities for growth and improvement. Youth who participate in these programs experience a high degree of program “ownership” which means they are more likely to stay involved and participate at a more invested level.

These programs also have a stronger “viral marketing” force; a group of young people eager to promote the programs and activities in their community and encourage their friends to participate. This force alone, according to Thommen, can be stronger than any other form of youth marketing and, as an added bonus, it’s completely free.

Today’s park and recreation programs face the challenge of creating activities, classes, camps, and events that will attract new youth as well as engage their current participants. Thommen explains that it is not acquiring the newest gadget or toy that drives

business and increases participation in a youth program. To capture new business, she says, youth programmers need to understand what social forces are behind youth decision making. Young people are always seeking new experiences and challenges, and this attitude will affect their wish to take part in youth programs and activities. Like any business that caters to the youth market, recreation agencies must stay in touch with the latest developments and trends in music, sports, technology, fashion, politics and social issues.

Thommen is quick to point out that successful youth programming goes beyond the features, “Flashy new video games, a skate park, and recording studio get them in the door - but if staff are not trained in a way that engages young people in a fun and relationship way, they don’t stay, no matter how cool the new toy is.”

Most youth program mission statements contain goals of developing leadership skills and improving self confidence among participants. Regardless of which model your youth program uses, your program leaders will always find it advantageous to solicit feedback from the youth they serve.

Success can be achieved with all three program models, but a program that actively encourages feedback and ideas from its participants will yield the best results in developing future leaders. These young people will have learned how to influence and change the organizations that serve them. This type of partnership between youth and program staff creates an environment based on trust and appreciation, an environment that gives young people a real sense of confidence and safety. Thommen explains that young people like to be heard, and the best way to show them you are listening is to design unique programs and activities with their ideas and interests in mind.

Summer Thommen has 15 years experience in the youth development field. She also specializes in cultural competency, organizational development, conflict resolution, and experiential learning for youth and adults.

An interview with Joe Perez Recreation Supervisor City of Anaheim

Bradley: Can you tell me more about how SAY is structured?

Perez: Project S.A.Y. (Support Anaheim's Youth) uses a combination of outreach, recreation, sports, and individualized guidance to engage junior high and high school-age youth in positive and constructive activities. Youth meet individually or in small groups with a Community Services Outreach Specialist to plan activities, resolve conflict, and problem solve issues of importance in a young person's life. Youth participate in a wide range of social, recreational, educational and character-building activities that help them develop the knowledge, skills and abilities for successful transition from adolescence to adulthood. Youth help plan their own activities under the guidance of the Outreach Specialist and these include outings to sporting events, camping trips, live theater productions, educational and cultural field trips, leadership development programs and service projects in the community.

Bradley: How do you measure the success of the program?

Perez: The Project S.A.Y. program measures success through short term and long term outcomes. Specifically, Project S.A.Y. directs it's work to provide youth with opportunities that will challenge and assist youth's acquisition of knowledge, skills, and abilities and effectively employ these in making solid decisions that have a positive impact on their lives. Academically, Project S.A.Y. strives to have youth succeed in school and graduate from high school and/or be promotion eligible in junior high school. Project S.A.Y. employs the following guidelines as the foundation for the work that is created and implement by its staff. These are to have youth:

- Develop the ability to make and reach short term and long term goals
- Attain academic success through good grades, appropriate behavior and being well-informed about graduation requirements
- Develop skills in leadership and community outreach through Project S.A.Y. Youth Leadership Council participation
- Be well informed about post-high school education options: colleges and universities, vocational schools and military services
- Acquire the basic skills needed to research and obtain employment
- Become well-informed about various careers and vocations

An Interview with Sabrina Bernardo Recreation Coordinator Fair Oaks Recreation & Park District

Bradley: Can you tell me about how Fair Oaks Youth Advisor Board is structured?

Bernardo: Fair Oaks Youth Advisor Board (FOYAB) is comprised of the commissioners (FOYAB members), one elected chair (President), one elected Vice Chair, one elected Secretary, one elected Programming Officer, and one elected Public Relations Officer, all of whom are in the 9th - 12th grade. They are overseen by one FOYAB Advisor.

Bradley: How do you measure the success of the program?

Bernardo: The success of FOYAB is measured by an end of year evaluation, hours volunteered, and events and programs that were offered. Beginning this next year I hope to utilize a pre and post evaluation (possibly something along the lines of Search Institute's assets) to get a more accurate idea of growth.

Bradley: How much influence does FOYAB have over designing new programs or changing existing ones?

Bernardo: FOYAB has quite a bit of influence, not just for the event and programs they are directly involved in but district and community events as well. Some examples include:

FOYAB serves in an advisory capacity to the Fair Oaks Board of Directors (FORPD) (represented by the FOYAB Chair) and is designed to give youth of Fair Oaks and the Sacramento area input into the district, its related functions, and its programs. This is truly an amazing opportunity for both the FOYAB chair and the district. The chair sits with and attends each board meeting, giving valuable input on all things Fair Oaks, and gives regular updates on FOYAB. The district is able to get a fresh perspective through the eyes of a young man or woman.

FOYAB has the opportunity to eliminate, change, or add positions, events, etc. provided they fall under the general guidelines outlined by the FOYAB Advisor (timeline affects FORPD and community, budget). FOYAB Advisor looks out for the best interest of the FOYAB, FORPD, and the community.

For example, FOYAB members determined they do not offer a strictly "Teen Event" through their end of year evaluation. They will look to create and implement a teen event of their choice, provided the new 2011- 2012 FOYAB wants to, next year.

FOYAB runs their own meetings (creates agendas, mtg. minutes) and events (timeline, decorations, set up/takedown, food) with the oversight of FOYAB Advisor.

Bradley: Do you have any examples of a youth/pop culture trend that you have been able to capitalize on to

- Develop a commitment to volunteer community service
- Acquire an awareness of the consequences of risky sexual behavior, including sexually transmitted diseases (STD's) and teen pregnancy
- Acquire a clear understanding of the consequences of tobacco, drug, alcohol and other drug abuse
- Acquire a solid knowledge of the dangers of being involved in gangs, party crews, tagging and other juvenile crime

Bradley: How much influence does SAY have over designing new programs or changing existing ones?

Perez: Project S.A.Y. is able to adjust to the ever-changing trends and needs of youth, as needed. A program review is undertaken at the completion of each school year to ensure that program guidelines are current and meeting the needs of Anaheim's youth. Due to the youth development framework with which Project S.A.Y. operates, the program remains fully flexible with each school year as new students become engaged in the program and "design" their activities for the year. This point is critical in youth buying in to the program and having the autonomy to create activities that they want to participate in. It's not about adult staff designing activities that they think are important for youth to participate in. It's all about adult staff and youth sitting together, having a dialogue, and creating activities that are both deemed important and relevant.

Bradley: Do you have any examples of a youth/pop culture trend that you have been able to capitalize on to create new activities in any of your youth programs?

Perez: Graffiti and graffiti-related "art" is a trend that we've been following for the past couple of years. The hip hop, alternative, and rap culture that youth are drawn to have literally translated to an increase in graffiti and graffiti-related crime in our community. Through the use of the Anaheim Youth Advisory Council, a council created by our Chief of Police John Welter to create a closer link between the Anaheim Police Department and community youth. This group has taken on the challenge to provide a prevention component to combating this criminal activity. They've targeted elementary, school-age youth to implement a graffiti prevention program that educates children on the dangers and expense related to graffiti and graffiti-related crime. They are currently in the second year of implementation and have targeted 250 children to participate in this activity that is entirely teen-driven.

Bradley: What youth culture trends/fads are presently having the most influence on the SAY members?

Perez: I think youth are more aware of volunteerism and giving back to their communities than ever before. I

create new activities in any of your youth programs? (for example: the popularity of competitive cooking shows acts as a catalyst for FORPD to hold a youth chili cook-off event or cake decorating competition)

Bernardo: Since I have been their Advisor, not so much, however, I suspect the brainstorming of the new "Teen Event" will be driven by youth and pop culture trends. They did however, right before I started, choose to change their annual mother/son dance to mother/son kickball, I suspect because it was not trendy or hip enough, and attendance was dropping year after year.

Bradley: Can you give me examples of any really awesome programs/activities designed by FOYAB?

Bernardo: Mother Son Kickball (new 2011), Father Daughter Dance, Dress and Suit Drive (new 2011), and Share the Spirit.

Bradley: Have you seen a rise in social consciousness or increased interest in community service by the youth in your programs? If so, how does this affect the activities you offer?

Bernardo: Yes! We have many youth who participate or have participated in internships for county representatives, youth who have applied for a seat on the Sacramento County Youth Commission for our area (cross your fingers one of our girls is waiting to hear), youth who are or will be running for student body government at their schools, and youth who just want to volunteer! It is amazing to me that as busy as some of these teens are (AP classes, work, family, JV or Varsity sports, other school clubs, and all the mandatory meetings and events for FOYAB) many still show up to other community events volunteering or come in to help with special projects or attend youth trainings (such as CPRS). As an advisor, seeing they want this I want to give them more, more to do, plan, take charge of, opportunities for growth.

Also, a great example of this is many little brothers or sisters have been introduced to FOYAB by their older siblings. FOYAB has had the privilege of having many siblings throughout its inception. I am looking forward to having a little brother and sister of two now alumni FOYAB members join FOYAB next year. One FOYAB member this past year emailed me almost every event asking if his little brother could also volunteer. (Who does this?)

Bernardo: How do you use social media in your youth programs?

Bernardo: FOYAB utilizes Facebook. There is one Facebook page for members only, used to help communicate meeting and event times and dates and reminders between each other and another Facebook page that is utilized to market FOYAB events. This past year online event postings (news sites, community boards, event sites) and FORPD district email blasts were updated or created by staff, next year they will begin taking this on completely or at least providing the verbiage for each event/program.

truly believe President Obama's message is hitting home and striking a cord with our youth. In addition, youth seem to be more socially and environmentally conscious now than in years past. It's because of this that Project S.A.Y. has increased the number of community service projects and volunteer activities the past three years. These range from graffiti paint-outs to feeding the homeless to park clean-ups. Project S.A.Y. staff have partnered with non-profit agencies to create service opportunities that are interesting, relevant, and meaningful to our youth participants.

Bradley: Do you find that these trends are having any effect on the types of programs/activities/events you are offering?

Perez: The effect trends are having are not extreme. More than anything, Project S.A.Y. staff are having to be more creative and at times think as our youth think to provide programming that is relevant and meaningful to our youth. If we've done a good job doing this, our youth keep coming back. It's one thing to bring them in and a whole other process in keeping them interested and coming back for more.

Bradley: Can you give me examples of any really awesome programs/activities designed by SAY?

Perez: The Project S.A.Y. Youth Cycling and Fitness Program is a good example of an awesome opportunity for our youth. The goal of this program is twofold; to provide a cycling and fitness program as a strategy to combat teenage obesity among youth participants and to develop cycling as a positive, healthy, and non-traditional lifestyle choice among Project S.A.Y. youth participants. This program stemmed from a discussion program staff had with youth about the increasing rates of teenagers that had become obese. Youth demonstrated an interest in fitness and staff provided an outlet, cycling. Moreover, organized cycling as a sport is not very common among our program demographic; predominantly low-income, Latino population. Suffice it to say, over time, youth have taken well to the Cycling and Fitness Program and participated in various cycling events throughout the Southern California area.

Bradley: How do you use social media in your youth programs?

Perez: We currently do not use social media in our youth programs. There have been a couple of "horror" stories with other local cities that have caused us to cautiously look at use of these in our program.

Additional Resources

America's Promise Alliance - www.americaspromise.org/
Access to resources on a large spectrum of issues pertinent to children and youth

California Coalition for Youth - www.calyouth.org/about/

A statewide nonprofit organization that serves disconnected youth throughout the state.

ERIC Clearinghouse - www.eric.ed.gov/

Online digital library of education research and information

Find Youth Info - <http://findyouthinfo.gov>

Promoting collaboration at all levels to promote positive outcomes for youth

National Alliance for Youth Sports - www.nays.org/

Promotes the value of sports and physical activities in the development of youth.

National Clearinghouse on Families and Youth - http://ncfy.acf.hhs.gov/topics/positive_youth_development

Family and Youth Services Bureau within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

National Collaboration for Youth - www.collab4youth.org/

Coalition of national organizations supporting positive, research-driven, youth development

Provincial Consortium on Youth in Recreation - <http://youthinrecreation.org/resources>

Resources that support opportunities for youth to have a voice in programs and services

Search Institute - www.search-institute.org/developmental-assets

Search Institute provides resources for helping create healthy communities for every young person

SparkAction - <http://sparkaction.org/>

Information on youth development from organizations and leaders across the country

The Youth Innovation Center - www.theinnovationcenter.org/what-we-do/youth-development

Creating practical resources, toolkits, and trainings to share new models of youth development

Youth Development Strategies Inc. - www.ydsi.org/ydsi/index.html

Helping communities improve long-term outcomes for their youth

Youth Leadership - www.youthleadership.com/

Dedicated to providing current, creative, and dynamic youth leadership information

Youth Leadership Institute - www.yli.org/

Building communities that invest in youth