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## **Opportunities Matter: Exploring Youth's Perspectives on Their Long-Term Participation in an Urban 4-H Youth Development Program**

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## **Opportunities Matter: Exploring Youth's Perspectives on Their Long-Term Participation in an Urban 4-H Youth Development Program**

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**Abstract:** This article highlights a study which explored youths' perspectives on their long-term involvement at Adventure Central, a comprehensive 4-H youth development program based at an urban park facility. We conducted four focus groups with 16 youth between the ages of 12 and 16 who had participated in the program between three and seven years. The youth experienced a wide range of opportunities including nature-related activities, jobs at park facilities, and travel. They spoke positively of their experiences and described how they benefited from their participation. Novelty, challenge, and leadership were key features of these opportunities. The youth noted the connection between learning and fun. In the process, they learned new skills, such as teamwork and public speaking, and developed personal qualities, such as responsibility, that helped them as they were growing up, transferred to other settings, and would benefit them in the future. Findings from this study suggest some clear implications for youth development professionals.

### **Introduction**

#### **Programs for Adolescents**

Within the youth development field, interest is growing in programs that address the needs of middle school and high school youth (Barr, Birmingham, Fornal, Klein, & Piha, 2006; Hall, Israel, & Shortt, 2004; Harris, 2008; Miller, 2003; Pittman, Yohalem, Wilson-Ahlstrom, & Ferber, 2003; Wynn, 2003; Yohalem, Wilson-Ahlstrom, & Pittman, 2005). Youth development professionals recognize that adolescence is a time of major developmental changes, and they are able to intentionally address these changes through their program offerings (Walker, Marczak, Blyth, & Borden 2005; Walker, 2006). During this time, adolescents are also expected to acquire a range of skills that will help them to make a successful transition to adulthood (Zarrett & Eccles, 2006).

Programs for this age group must respond to their changing interests (Chaskin & Baker, 2006) and developmental tasks to be a good fit (Eccles et al., 1993; Walker, 2006). Researchers suggest that older youth may desire different program offerings and different patterns of participation than younger youth. (Harris, 2008; Herrera & Arbretton, 2003; Marczak, Dworkin, Skuza & Beyers, 2006; Vandell et al., 2006). Youth programs are characterized by voluntary participation, and youth typically experience high levels of motivation and interest in the types of activities these programs offer (Larson, 2000; Vandell, Shernoff, Pierce, Bolt, Dadisman, & Brown, 2005). Results of research studies suggest that the success of programs for older youth may be related to the availability of leadership roles and whether there are opportunities for choice in the content and structure of activities (Harris, 2008).

### **Benefits of Participation**

The current body of research indicates that youth obtain developmental benefits from consistent participation in well-run, quality youth programs (e.g., Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Little & Harris, 2003; Little, Wimer, & Weiss, 2008; Scott-Little, Hamann, & Jurs, 2002; Vandell et al., 2006). Through such programs, youth are able to meet needs for belonging, connection, independence, and mastery (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Kress, 2006). Research suggests that to derive the benefits of participating in youth programs, youth must participate with sufficient frequency, over a long enough period of time, and in a variety of activities (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Metz, Goldsmith, & Arbretton, 2008; Rose-Krasnor, Busseri, Willoughby, & Chalmers, 2006; Vandell et al., 2005; Vandell et al., 2006).

Studies have shown that higher frequency of participation is associated with increased developmental outcomes (Hansen & Larson, 2007; Little & Harris, 2003). Additionally, frequency and breadth of participation (i.e., participation in a variety of activities) were found to relate to more positive well-being, higher academic orientation, stronger interpersonal bonds, and less risk behavior involvement (Rose-Krasnor et al., 2006). Regarding duration of participation, longer participation was related to more favorable development (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Vandell et al., 2006). Although little is known about the ideal amount of participation, most likely it is not "one size fits all," but dependent upon who is involved and under what conditions. We know that participation matters (Weiss, Little, & Bouffard, 2005), and there continues to be interest in outcomes of long-term participation.

Of course, the necessary condition is that youth must participate in programs to derive these benefits. However, participation is more than simply showing up, and joining and persisting in out-of-school activities is a dynamic process (Lock & Costello, 2001). Recent research seems to indicate that youth may initially have extrinsic motivations for participating, but over time, they may adopt the program's goals as their own (Pearce & Larson, 2006). Consequently, these conditions would lead them to become engaged participants, that is, "being actively involved in cognitive and social endeavors that promote growth" (Weiss et al., 2005, p. 24). When youth are engaged in such a manner, they experience the benefits of participation more fully.

Several factors are thought to enhance engagement. Recent research has begun to make the connection between youth engagement as the mechanism that leads to youth outcomes (Miller & Hall, 2006; Pearce & Larson, 2006). Studies show that youth desire new and challenging activities, as well as opportunities for leadership, to hold meaningful roles, and to carry out real responsibilities (Arbretton, Bradshaw, Metz, Sheldon, & Pepper, 2008; Chaskin & Baker, 2006; Hansen & Larson, 2007; Harris, 2008; Pearce & Larson, 2006). Studies also show that these conditions are present in many organized youth activities (Hansen, Larsen, & Dworkin, 2003).

However, youth programs often experience a decline in their adolescent enrollment (Russell & Heck, 2008; Vandell et al., 2006). Such a decline may be problematic because participation sustained over time is thought to lead to more positive outcomes than casual or irregular participation (Miller, 2003; Weiss et al., 2005). Russell and Heck (2008) suggest that the dropout phenomenon may be due to a mismatch between youth programs and youths' developmental needs, a view that is supported by Eccles et al.'s (1993) theory of stage-environment fit. Thus, it is important to understand what aspects of youth programs are sufficiently engaging to sustain long-term participation.

### **Participation in 4-H Programs**

One specific organization is 4-H, the country's largest youth development organization, with more than seven million youth members and 500,000 volunteers (Kress, 2006). 4-H has a long, rich history of positive educational programs designed to develop citizenship, leadership, and life skills. Youth participate in 4-H through a variety of delivery modes, including clubs, camps, school enrichment, and after-school programs. Although 4-H is often associated with its agricultural roots in rural areas, programs are also located in suburban and urban communities across the country and on military installations around the world.

Studies of 4-H programs have used various approaches, including alumni studies, surveys of current members, comparison with non-members, and surveys of key informants (i.e., volunteer leaders, staff, and parents). Overall, studies of 4-H members show that participation leads to the development of many skills. For example, youth develop their abilities to work in teams, speak in public, meet new people, and assume responsibility as a result of their participation, whether through camps (Digby & Ferrari, 2007; Ferrari & McNeely, 2007; Garst & Johnson, 2005) community service (Hairston, 2004), or overall participation (National 4-H Impact Assessment, 2001; Fox, Schroeder, & Lodl, 2003; Maass, Wilken, Jordan, Culen, & Place, 2006). In a recent survey in Ohio, half of the 4-H members in 5<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup> grades indicated their participation in 4-H has been critical to their success in life (Lewis, 2008).

Longitudinal research has shown that 4-H youth were more likely to be on a positive youth development trajectory than comparison youth (Lerner, Lerner, & Phelps, 2008). 4-H members and alumni repeatedly have identified the development of leadership skills as an important aspect of their 4-H involvement (Mulroy & Kraimer-Rickaby, 2006). Consistent with the literature that identifies leadership experiences as a key component of programs for adolescents, Russell and Heck (2008) found that those 4-H members in leadership positions had a low risk of dropping out.

4-H, however, is not immune from declining membership as youth reach their adolescent years (Albright, 2008; Lauxman, 2002; Russell & Heck, 2008). Those programs that have been able to attract and engage adolescents over time bear further examination. The current study is designed to explore such issues of participation.

### **Purpose**

The study reported here is part of a larger investigation of long-term participation in 4-H youth development programs. In the current study we explored youths' perspectives of their involvement at Adventure Central, a comprehensive 4-H youth development program based at an urban park facility in Dayton, Ohio. Specifically, we wanted to learn about the opportunities

they considered meaningful and ways in which these opportunities provided a context for learning and development.

## Program Setting

Adventure Central was developed in response to a community need for positive youth development programs (Cochran, Arnett, & Ferrari, 2007). It is a partnership between Ohio State University (OSU) Extension's 4-H Youth Development program and Five Rivers MetroParks in Dayton, Ohio. Serving as a hub for out-of-school time programming, Adventure Central brings the 4-H experience into an urban environment for youth ages 5 through 18 during out-of-school hours. Beginning with just 25 youth when pilot programming started in October 2000, total enrollment for the 2007-2008 year has grown to 380 youth and their parents. There have been over 64,000 total contact hours with youth in after-school, day camp, and residential camping programs, and youth attended at least 100 days of programming (with some attending as many as 160 days). During the school year, youth typically attend three hours a day, whereas in the summer attendance averages seven hours.

The Adventure Central program is housed in a renovated one-floor building with an open, central reception area that includes lockers for youth to store their belongings. The building consists of a multi-purpose room, kitchen, staff offices, five classrooms, and a mobile lab of fifteen laptop computers. Situated on over 60 acres, outdoor space includes raised bed gardens, a fenced play area, access to a creek, a paved recreation trail, and hiking trails, all providing an opportunity for a variety of interactions with the natural environment. This physical location is particularly relevant in an urban area, as it has allowed for a consistent, stable presence and identity in the neighborhood.

Youth at Adventure Central have the potential to benefit from broad participation in terms of the intensity, duration, and breadth of the programming opportunities available. The center is open for programming between 1:30 and 8:00 p.m. from Monday through Thursday during the school year and offers expanded hours in the summer. Program delivery at Adventure Central includes after-school, summer day camp, parent engagement, and teen programming. Program offerings include homework assistance, computer lab, and activities in the areas of science, nature, literacy, and healthy lifestyles. In addition, youth have the opportunity to develop workforce skills, leadership, and cultural literacy through participation in a youth board, supervised job experiences, and special projects. An emphasis is placed on hands-on, experiential activities that use research-based curriculum. In addition, there is an embedded curriculum that addresses developing personal qualities, such as respect and responsibility, and life skills, such as leadership, teamwork, and communication. This is accomplished by such means as a code of conduct, as well as an emphasis on building relationships with peers and adult role models.

The two 4-H Youth Development educators from Ohio State University (OSU) Extension who lead the Adventure Central program spend much of their time on staff development and training. A diverse staff mix – in terms of background, age, gender, race, level of education, and other characteristics – is an important part of Adventure Central. Partnerships with the local universities and organizations have provided the service of six full-time AmeriCorps members. In 2007, 150 volunteers contributed over 20,000 hours working with youth.

Adventure Central's program is guided by a framework that incorporates the features of positive developmental settings (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; National 4-H Impact Assessment, 2001),

essential elements (Kress, 2006), and the six Cs – competence, confidence, character, caring, connection, and contribution (Lerner, 2006; Lerner et al., 2005); this framework is described in more detail elsewhere (Cochran, Arnett, & Ferrari, 2007). In addition, continuous monitoring and evaluation ensure that the programs at Adventure Central are aligned with best practices in youth development.

Using multiple evaluation methods, several studies indicate that Adventure Central is meeting the developmental needs of its participants. Evaluation at Adventure Central has focused on aspects of overall program quality (Ferrari, Paisley, Turner, Arnett, Cochran, & McNeely, 2002) youth-adult relationships (Paisley & Ferrari, 2005), motivation for participation and retention of teens (Ferrari & Turner, 2006), parental perceptions (Ferrari, Futris, Smathers, Cochran, Arnett, & Digby, 2006), and workforce skills (Ferrari, Arnett, & Cochran, 2008).

### **Sample and Methodology**

Miller (2003) noted that youth programs often offer intangibles that are hard to quantify. Thus, we chose to employ qualitative methods. Specifically, we chose to explore the unique perspective of the youth participants through focus groups.

To develop questions, we followed procedures recommended by Patton (1990) and Krueger and Casey (2000). Questions were semi-structured and open-ended to elicit youths' perspectives. They addressed how participation has been helpful to them, attitudes and skills they have acquired, opportunities afforded to them, and their insight into program features that have captured their interest and engaged them in sustained participation.

We conducted four focus groups with a total of 16 participants out of a possible 19 who met the criterion of having attended the program for at least three years. Several youth had attended the program since its inception in 2000 when they were 5 or 6 years old. Average attendance in the program was five years. Participants, all of whom were African-American, were between the ages of 11 and 16 ( $M = 13.75$ ). Four were male and 12 were female. Each interview lasted approximately 1 to 1 ½ hours and took place at Adventure Central. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed for analysis.

We examined the interview transcripts and identified key themes related to the research questions, then engaged in an iterative process of clarification and refinement regarding these themes. Transcripts were coded in accordance with the themes, and passages were grouped together to categorize the main ideas as presented by the youth.

### **Results: Youth Responses**

In the interviews, youth discussed the types of opportunities they had over the years as participants in the Adventure Central program. They spoke about a variety of different opportunities, many of which involved specific things they learned or did and their interactions with people within the context of the after-school setting. In the next section, we describe the types of opportunities that were meaningful from the youths' perspective. Further analysis of these opportunities led us to look at their salient features, in other words, how opportunities matter.



## Types of Opportunities

The opportunities to do new things included experiences with nature as well as with the workforce. Because of the program's physical location in an urban park facility, there was a unique opportunity for participants to "be with nature right in the middle of the city." Other nature-related experiences included regular trips to the nearby creek, fishing, and overnight camping. Workforce-related experiences included filling out job applications, developing resumes, and having a job interview, as well as actual on-the-job experiences at Adventure Central and other parks within the MetroParks system.

Opportunities to go places were viewed positively. The youth spoke at length about their experiences in the Teamwork and Cultural Literacy program, where they traveled out of state and experienced how other cultures lived. Another new type of opportunity was for public speaking, with participants noting that "in almost every activity we do, you are speaking." In addition to these everyday activities, they gave presentations at national conferences, the state fair, and other local and state 4-H events.

There were many opportunities for the youth to have leadership roles, such as serving on committees and helping younger children with activities and homework. They noted that "we actually ran our own meetings." The youth were able to give back through community service activities like Make a Difference Day. They were also able to give their opinions and input, for example, about the types of activities offered.

Participants spent some of their time at Adventure Central in more everyday activities such as doing homework, hanging out with friends, eating a meal, and playing games. All of the opportunities provided the context for learning new knowledge and skills. What they learned ranged from general –"you learn about the world and stuff" – to more specific knowledge, such as the names of plants, the need for exercise, and the dangers of smoking. Among the skills they learned were leadership, teamwork, decision making, and emotional regulation.

These opportunities also provided the context for positive interactions with adults and peers. The youth placed a high value on the relationships they were able to form through Adventure Central, indicating they felt welcomed by others and found it easy to fit in. In addition, respondents remarked how they enjoyed meeting youth in other states through Adventure Central's trips and activities. They felt supported by the staff, who listened to them ("You have people to talk to here....you know the people here are going to listen to you.") and who helped them to "make sure you are on the right path" and to work through any personal difficulties they were having.

## How Opportunities Matter

As youth reflected on their experiences, additional insights about these opportunities became clear. In our second wave of analysis, we were able to identify the salient aspects of these opportunities. Although the content of what the youth learned was important, more meaningful was the value these opportunities held in terms of their development.

***Opportunities keep them coming back.*** The youth spoke about how coming to Adventure Central had opened new doors for them. "I came here because of new opportunities and new experiences that you won't have at home. I do have fun at home, but the stuff you do here you might not do at home." Fun was mentioned often in connection with why the youth liked coming to Adventure Central. In addition to the things they got to do, people figured prominently in their comments.

"We are actually out getting into stuff, field trips, meet new people, learn new things. I think that is what keeps me coming back. The people too."

"I like learning stuff here and coming here and seeing everyone everyday. I know everybody here since I have been here so long. It is fun."

"Adventure Central is like a home away from home and it's fun and you get to see your friends."

**Multiple opportunities are available.** Youth had multiple opportunities to participate in particular activities and to learn certain skills. It appears that they learned through a process of repeated exposure to new opportunities. This repeated exposure helped them to "get used to it," for example, to become more comfortable with the natural environment and not to be afraid when speaking in front of groups.

"I started working at [one of the MetroParks], and I didn't want to work with plants and there used to be a lot of bugs and bees. I do not like bees. Then, I started getting used to it and it all went well. Plus the people you work with....They are in there and make you laugh, and then they get you to doing stuff. You just end up liking it."

"Before...I didn't say anything. Now in a group I can talk."

"I went to the Ohio State Fair two years in a row and did a presentation. My first year, I was real scared and intimidated, but my friends I was working with were used to it and they weren't scared. So, they started talking to me about it. The second time I was used to it. I was ready."

"You look forward to coming here every year looking for something different instead of looking at the same thing over and over again."

As a result of opportunities like those mentioned above, respondents' attitudes changed and their confidence increased. This shift in attitude is exemplified by one participant, who initially described herself as someone who liked to be inside, but who now "didn't want to be inside, I wanted to be outside and get dirty." As another youth noted, "it is hard to be shy because there are so many activities where it involves speaking and a team. You got to work with people. It is hard to be reserved."

**Opportunities change with age and maturity.** The youth appreciated the new opportunities and experiences they had as they became older. These opportunities often involved novelty ("things I never imagined I'd do"), challenge ("getting out of my comfort zone"), responsibility, and being able to do "real" work within the program and beyond.

"You get different opportunities as you get older. When I first started coming here we played with our friends. Once you get to a certain group they ask you to do certain things and to be more involved in different programs and stuff...now we have the JET [Job Experience and Training] program, doing new things every day."

The youth felt they were viewed as role models, and that the younger children might be encouraged to remain with the program by watching what they did: "I think once the little kids



see what we do, it makes them want to do that. So, they might stick around until they get bigger." They also recognized that they had to earn more freedom by demonstrating that they could accept the responsibility that went along with it. For the most part, youth thought that the amount of responsibility they had was just about right. However, some youth felt they might be able to handle even more responsibility.

"As we got older...we had to make more decisions and have a little bit more say-so. They let us run our activities. Say we wanted to do papier mache, if we give a valid reason why...I'm pretty sure we could do it. We have to show our responsibilities. We also have to do our part and be respectful at the same time. If our group leader might say no, we have to be able to take it as maybe; if we showed her we are capable of doing it, then maybe we'd be able to do it."

As youth got older, they had opportunities to contribute; not only were they asked to give input, but they felt that their ideas were taken seriously.

"They [the program leaders] asked people what they thought, what helped, what did they think they should do or what do you think they would enjoy. They gave us some of their ideas and we gave them feedback. Now, you can see some of the stuff starting to happen."

***Taking advantage of available opportunities.*** The youth recognized if they took advantage of the opportunities made available to them, they could "get something good out of it." They also felt that people needed to be open to trying new things. On more than one occasion, youth spoke about being presented with and taking advantage of opportunities to "get out of my comfort zone." They often took advantage of these opportunities even though they were unsure of the outcome. Their willingness to take such risks implies a sense of safety and trust in the adult staff members. Some of these experiences were with nature, work experiences, and experiences they encountered on some of their travels.

"You've got to be willing to try different stuff though. Because like when you have to go for an interview. I was freaked out. I was scared."

"We went to a camp. We were supposed to make a house to sleep in out of cardboard boxes we taped. I was thinking that sleeping outside was not going to work. I got out of my comfort zone. We tasted different foods from different places and different types of stuff and that took us out of our comfort zone."

"They had us do the high ropes, and I am not afraid of heights, but I can't stand being high at a certain level, and we had a little harness on, and I got halfway through it and there was a rope that you had to swing across...I was happy that I did it at the end."

***Making good choices and staying out of trouble.*** The youth felt that Adventure Central provided them with a positive alternative and kept them out of trouble and undesirable neighborhoods. As one young person explained, "It's a good place to be. It has kept me out of trouble. If I didn't come here and went straight home from school, I don't know what I would be doing." Others echoed that sentiment:

"I think Adventure Central has kept me out of trouble because there is no telling what I would be doing. Probably sitting on the couch eating potato chips."

"Coming here has really kept me out of trouble. Where I live, it is nothing but trouble. When I leave from here, I might sit on my front porch for awhile; I refuse to walk around the neighborhood. We do go outside here, and we do learn about decision making and all that."

Clearly, having a place to go was important, but it was also the activities and the people that were beneficial.

"Here if you do something wrong, they teach you and they show you how it can affect you or how much trouble it can get you in. They have programs like *Health Rocks*, and they teach us not to do drugs...they teach us not to do bad stuff and not to be involved with violence."

The youth noted that a difference between school and Adventure Central was the people: "you get a talk from somebody with experience, somebody who has done the same thing."

***Learning and having fun are connected.*** The youth also recognized that they were learning and having fun at the same time. "I like it a lot here. Not only is it educational, but it is fun here as well. You get to learn a lot of stuff that you don't learn at school here." In addition to an overall fun atmosphere, there were certain themes in their responses. The creek, in particular, was a place that was associated with fun. Youth also reported that it was not simply the opportunity to do activities that they might do elsewhere, but that "you exercise in a fun way." When the youth spoke of their work experiences, they often were described as initially challenging, but ultimately enjoyable.

"Working at the arboretum, I had no choice but to touch the caterpillars because that is what I was working with and that is what I was getting paid for. It wasn't just me getting paid for it. It was a lot of fun and I got to do a lot of things that I thought I wouldn't like to do but ended up liking a lot."

***Learning transfers to other settings.*** Furthermore, youth also recognized that what they learned through Adventure Central's programs carried over into other areas of their life, at school, at home, and at work.

"Now when I go to different places, it is easier for me to adapt with different people and their backgrounds."

"One thing that is important to me is responsibility because after working through the JET program I take more responsibility in doing my chores now because before then I really didn't do anything around the house. It helped me with my school work because I didn't take any responsibility if I had to get something done."

"At [my job at another park], I didn't know I was doing as well as I was doing. I was just doing things that I learned here and that I know how to do. [That makes] you feel a lot better about yourself. Like you can do this and you can do that."

***Helping in the future.*** Youth also felt the skills they were learning now would help them in their future careers. It is notable that when they spoke of skills they learned, they mentioned skills termed *21<sup>st</sup> century skills* (Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, 2003), that is, those such as

leadership, problem solving, and teamwork, that apply to many jobs rather than those skills that are job specific.

"I want to be a lawyer when I grow up, and I think Adventure Central will have a part of that because being a lawyer you have to work with the person you are defending or the person who is having a problem. You have to learn to talk with them. You have to be like a mini team, so team working skills. Then, when you are in the court you have to talk in front of people, so public speaking skills also. I think all of those things would help me at that job."

"I know that the program would help me with sports management because I had to plan so many activities while I was here."

"I think it will help you anywhere or in any job you decide to go to. It will just help you to be able to be in the work environment, being able to deal with coworkers, being able to deal with difficult people who you might not always get along with, and people that are different than you."

In summary, the youth experienced a wide range of opportunities throughout their years of participation at Adventure Central. They spoke positively of their experiences, of the ways they had grown personally, and of their relationships with peers and staff. They learned new skills that helped them as they were growing up and also recognized the ways in which their participation would benefit them in the future.

## Discussion

The goal of this study was to explore long-term participation in a 4-H youth development program in an urban after-school setting. As after-school programs take a growing interest in serving middle school and high school youth, it is critical to understand how to best meet their needs through program offerings and structures that are different from what exists for younger children. The youth in this study were able to articulate clearly not only how they benefited from their participation, but also what specific program aspects were meaningful to them. Clearly, our study documented that Adventure Central has affected participants' lives in positive ways, such as having new opportunities they wouldn't have had otherwise.

As youth move into late adolescence, they must begin to make critical decisions about their future educational and employment plans. The youth in this study gained new knowledge and skills, particularly in areas of interpersonal relationships, communication, and job preparation. These competencies enhanced their feelings of confidence and self-mastery at the present time, and also prepared them for a successful transition into young adulthood, higher education, and the world of work. With employers increasingly concerned that many entrants to the workforce lack essential skills (Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006; Levy & Murnane, 2006), it is important for youth development professionals to intentionally address how their programs might assist in this transition (Cochran & Ferrari, 2008). The opportunity to explore new interests, work in small groups with others, learn real work skills, and connect with the broader community through after-school programs is "emerging as one of the nation's most promising strategies for developing twenty-first century skills" (Schwarz & Stolow, 2006, p. 81). This is especially critical for urban minority youth who face challenges with respect to their transition to the workforce (e.g., Constantine, Erickson, Banks, & Timberlake, 1998; Lippman, Atienza, Rivers, & Keith, 2008).

We found that Adventure Central integrated meaningful and enjoyable ways of learning, and did so in a way to reflect the changing developmental needs from middle to late childhood, and into adolescence. Although structured differently than most 4-H club programs, the youth were engaged in typical 4-H opportunities, such as learning subject-specific knowledge, public speaking, leadership, camping, attending and presenting at 4-H conferences, and participating in the state fair, that were beneficial learning experiences, as well as being engaged in additional opportunities unique to Adventure Central. It should be noted that youth at Adventure Central participate with greater frequency than if they were members of a typical 4-H club. However, the current study as well as previous research has documented the existence of positive youth-staff relationships (Paisley & Ferrari, 2005), a sense of belonging (Ferrari et al., 2006; Ferrari & Turner, 2006), and mastery of skills (Ferrari et al., 2008), demonstrating that the essential elements are present to facilitate learning and development.

As the youth grew older, they saw new opportunities they could aspire to, such as serving as a teen leader or participating in the workforce skills program. They were given more responsibility and challenged in new ways. The opportunity to take on new tasks and master new skills are necessary components of intentional youth development programs. Such opportunities for progressive learning and leadership are important because they allow youth to maintain their interest and continue their involvement as they get older (Walker, 2006). It is evident that the youth felt these skills were now helping them in other settings and they were able to articulate how skills learned in Adventure Central has helped them at home and school. They also could envision how these skills could help in the future.

The results of this study lend support to those who note that environments suited for adolescents' developmental needs must provide sufficient amounts of both support and challenge (Eccles et al., 1993). The youth trusted their peers and the adult staff, who helped them safely navigate new or frightening situations such as public speaking, having a job, camping, or other aspects of the natural environment that were unfamiliar to them. Furthermore, the findings support other research indicating that challenging activities (Miller & Hall, 2006) and leadership roles (Arbreton et al., 2008; Chaskin & Baker, 2006; Hansen & Larson, 2007; Harris, 2008; Pearce & Larson, 2006) are important for development. Lacking such challenges, youth may not experience significant growth.

Finally, from a theoretical perspective, the findings lend support to the usefulness of stage-environment fit (Eccles et al., 1993) and developmental intentionality (Walker, 2006; Walker et al., 2005) to inform youth development programs. They are also congruent with the grounded theory being developed by Larson and his colleagues (e.g., Larson, 2007; Larson & Brown, 2007; Larson & Hansen, 2005; Larson, Hansen, & Walker, 2005; Larson et al., 2004; Larson & Walker, 2006; Larson & Wood, 2006; Pearce & Larson, 2006; Watkins, Larson, & Sullivan, 2007). Specifically, their work has sought to describe the ingredients of positive youth development and the processes of developmental change. Larson (2000) contends that youth activities provide a "fertile context" for development to occur (p. 178). Researchers and practitioners should consider using these theoretical perspectives to inform their work.

## **Implications**

The findings from this study suggest some clear implications for youth development professionals. As expected, we gained valuable insight about what programs can do to actively

engage teens. Specifically, youth development professionals can look for ways to increase the developmental value of opportunities for youth in the following ways.

1. Intentionally develop activities that are relevant in the world outside of the program to enable participants to make the transition to adulthood.
2. Provide youth with progressively more challenging experiences, responsible roles, and leadership opportunities.
3. These experiences may take youth out of their comfort zone; therefore, ensure that adults provide sufficient supports, such as helping youth break a project into manageable steps and set realistic goals for their work (Larson, Hansen, & Walker, 2005).

Both scholars and practitioners have noted that youth do not gain skills and develop into caring, contributing citizens by simply showing up at programs (e.g., Weiss et al., 2005). The two-pronged challenge of recruitment (attracting youth early so they grow up within an organizational culture of positive youth development) and retention (keeping them involved in meaningful ways to foster engagement) will continue to be a concern of youth development professionals. By asking youth to describe their perspective, it was clear that it was not any single activity that was the “magic bullet” of engagement. In fact, to assume so would be missing the point. For example, we found that experiences with nature were important to the participants in our study. Does that mean that program planners should rush to include nature in their programs? Not necessarily, or at least not for this reason, because other activities, such as the arts (e.g., Larson & Brown, 2007; Larson & Walker, 2006), can produce similar results. Instead, it is important to understand *why* these particular experiences were salient. The key appears to be knowing that opportunities matter, ensuring that they are intentionally designed with adolescents’ needs and interests in mind, and ensuring that the contexts of these opportunities contain features known to contribute to positive development (e.g., caring adults).

This study provides support to the growing body of literature on positive outcomes of long-term participation and how the opportunities provided by such programs lead to youth becoming engaged participants, able to reap the developmental benefits afforded by their participation. However, youth development professionals’ job is never done, as they must continue to reflect on what works and why, and then act on this understanding.

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