
Encouraging Positive Youth Development with Youth Leadership Summits

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Abstract: This article describes the California 4-H Youth Development Program's (4-H YDP) creation of a Youth Leadership Summit (YLS), as well as information gained from three summits held in the summers of 1999 through 2001. Previous studies (Camino, 2000; Lerner, 2000; Zeldin, 2000) suggested that youth-adult collaborations along with meaningful activities could have a positive impact on youth. Therefore, the summits emphasized the positive youth development model, employed youth-adult collaborations, and encouraged youth to become involved in their communities. In this article, we share the YLS procedures, the roles of youth and adults and the engagement of youth on community issues. The YLS model developed by the California 4-H YDP impacted the individuals and communities involved in important and positive ways and might be a useful model to follow in the establishment of similar youth programs developed by youth professionals.

Introduction

The Youth Leadership Summit (YLS) was developed by the California 4-H Youth Development Program (4-H YDP). The 4-H YDP has its historical foundations in a model of positive youth development that aims to educate youth to be successful agents of their own development through learning leadership and life skills (Rasmussen, 1989). With an increased emphasis on research informing practice (Braverman, Carlos & Stanley, 2000), 4-H YDP staff wanted to design and implement a program that focused on creating youth-adult partnerships rather than the mentorship model favored in the past, as well as provide opportunities for community engagement (Benard, 1991; Camino, 2000; Scales, Benson, Leffert & Blyth, 2000; Zeldin, 2000).

The youth-adult partnership model differs from a mentoring model because of its focus on encouraging mutuality in youth-adult relationships (Camino, 2000). Mutuality can result in new synergy leading to greater innovation and productivity, and a deeper commitment to organizations and communities (Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes & Calvert, 2000). Based on these findings, the 4-H YDP developed a summit process in which youth and adults could relate in a partnership format.

Current research indicates that adult attitudes toward youth can change and often become more positive when adults observe the participation of youth in community service projects (Calabrese & Schumer, 1986). To promote this, the California 4-H YDP chose to develop a summit process that also utilized community involvement. By engaging youth within their communities, youth would have the opportunity to explore adult roles (Pittman, 2002). Through contributing to their communities, youth would develop competence which can lead to a sense of mastery at the same time it encourages civic participation (Camino, 2000; Perkins, et al, 2003; Pittman, 2002). Finally, the YLS process would allow youth a voice to contribute to society at large (Quinn, 1999).

The Design and Format of the Youth Leadership Summit

The design of the YLS and the identification of the audience were purposeful. The format of each summit was under the direction of the YLS director. The director worked with teens between the ages of 16 and 19, who applied, interviewed and were selected from a state-wide pool of candidates to participate as members of the youth planning committee for the event. Using the National 4-H Conference as a model, the youth planning committee identified issues that young people were facing in their communities, and then initiated the formation of "consulting groups" around these community issues.

The summit was offered as a pre-conference addition to the California 4-H State Leadership Conference, which allowed for the sharing of facility rental expenses. In order to get good mixtures of teens representing a variety of backgrounds and experiences each county sent a county team consisting of two teens from the 4-H YDP club program and two teens from the 4-H YDP, who were not in the club program or were from other youth organizations. One adult, typically a certified 4-H YDP volunteer leader, acted as adult partner and chaperone. Youth and adults also shared in the costs through registration fees. However, participants were eligible for state provided or local scholarship funding to assist with their expenses.

How county teams selected their consulting group varied from year to year. At the 2000 summit, delegates participated in an informational assembly, where consulting group facilitators made brief presentations outlining the specific points of each consulting group. After the presentations, county teams reviewed and selected the consulting group in which their team would participate. In the summits held in 1999 and 2001, teams were given a description of and registered for consulting groups prior to attending the summits. By providing this information in advance, teams had the opportunity to review, discuss, evaluate and select the consulting group most relevant to the needs of their community. We found this process to be most effective, as it allowed the teams to be specific and deliberate about their consulting group selection.

Consulting groups met in individually assigned rooms at the conference site. The consulting group set the stage for teens and adults to mutually work together on a community issue that was of interest and importance. See Table 1 below for the YLS process.

Table 1
The Youth Leadership Summit Process

<i>What</i>	<i>How</i>
1. Planning Committee selected	Teens completed applications, were invited to an interview and were selected to a state-wide leadership team, of which the planning and delivery of the YLS was a task.
2. Planning Committee meets	Over the course of 14 months, the committee planned all of the details relating to the YLS. One major task was to assess and identify topics for the consulting groups, as well as identify youth and adult teams to facilitate the consulting groups.
3. Advertise conference	Flyers, websites, direct presentations.
4. Registration of participants	Maintained by Director and staff.
5. Arrival at conference	General assembly hosted and facilitated by teen planning committee set the stage for YLS objectives and process.
6. Breakdown into consulting groups	Meeting in separate rooms, county teams learned to assess and address community issues. Focus was on the process of utilizing consulting groups to address community issues, not necessarily the topic itself.
7. Consulting group meetings	Develop action plan to address community need. Teams were asked to identify: problems or special needs, an activity for solution, the audience, time, money, resources, and partners needed, as well as benefits, publicity and reporting approaches.
8. Closing of summit	Assembly of all groups to report back and share their action plan.
9. Follow up of action plans	Mid-year and final reports required teams to report progress on action plans.
10. Recognition of teams	Teams who completed their action plans received a scholarship to attend the YLS the following year where their action plan was featured during the general assembly. Teams also assisted in the consulting group process by offering real-world experiences and suggestions.

Youth-adult teams spent about six hours learning about the topic and evaluating possible solutions. The teams then wrote an "action plan" identifying the issue to be addressed in their local community. See Appendix A for a sample of the Action Planning Sheet. Action plans were

reviewed by the YLS director and photocopied for file at the state 4-H YDP office. The originals along with copies for each individual were then returned to the county team. Long-term investment of the selected projects was encouraged by allowing a timeline of one year. Mid-year through the project, county teams were asked to provide a written report to the YLS director to assess project progress and direction. Members of the team worked together and provided written reports that addressed the areas of budget, accomplishments, audiences, time invested, community impacts, evaluation and marketing. Completed projects were recognized at the following year's YLS.

Impacts and Success of the Youth Leadership Summit

Three summits were held during a three-year period (1999, 2000, 2001), with twelve projects completed. Since some teams did not complete their reports, their progress could not be assessed. In this paper, we focus on the completed and successful action plans by focusing on the narrative reports of the youth-adult teams. In their narratives, the teams discussed the evolution of their projects, what they gained from participation, their perceptions of support, as well as their perceptions of challenges and successes. See Table 2 below for a description of the completed projects.

Table 2
Youth Development YLS Projects

1. County Family Fair: Three teens and one adult developed an education booth at the County Family Fair to provide teens and families with hands-on science activities.
2. Airport Neighborhood Garden: Four teens and two adults collaborated with the Airport Neighbors United and the Neighborhood Youth Council to develop a garden on a vacant lot.
3. County Teen Leadership Retreat: Two teens and one adult developed an implemented a workshop on developing self esteem for youth 7 th grade and older.
4. Homebound Senior Program: The same team developed the "Twelve Days of Christmas" program that provided home-bound seniors with holiday gifts.
5. Hi 4-H Club Development: Three teens and one adult created an older member leadership program for 4-H youth in the County.
6. Safe and Sane Halloween: Six teens and one adult hosted a booth at the annual Kid Fest to educate young children about Halloween Safety related to costumes, trick-or-treating and candy inspection.
7. Outdoor Learning Environment: Three teens and one adult planned, implemented and delivered an environmental education day to 105 fourth and fifth graders.
8. On the Wild Side: Four teens and one adult developed two overnight environmental education camps for 160 fourth through sixth graders
9. Mini and Teen Involvement: Two teens developed a mentoring/education/leadership program between teens and children from kindergarten through 3 rd graders in 4-H.
10. County Teen Council: Three teens and one adult developed and implemented a Teen 4-H Council to build leadership skills and engage in community service.
11. Youth Media Packet: Three teens and one adult developed and distributed a Youth Media Packet that contained information on how to submit news releases and develop successful relationships with members of the media.
12. Teens & Adults Hand in Hand: Two teens and one adult sponsored a breakfast hosted by a panel of youth leaders who spoke about community service opportunities and the value of youth leadership in their community.

We examined the narrative reports of the successful teams along with retrospective communications with 4-H YDP staff in order to assess:

- life skills gained
- level of youth-adult relationships
- success and impact of the projects

Life skills

Using a matrix of the 35 life skills identified from the *Targeting Life Skills Model: Training Guide* (Hendricks, 1998), each action plan was assessed on life skills. Based on Hendricks' (1998) model, the life-skills of goal setting, planning/organizing, communication and leadership were present in all twelve (100%) of the action plan narratives. In addition, life skills in the areas of decision making, wise use of resources, social skills, contributions to group effort, team work and self responsibility were present in 6 (50%) of the completed action plans. Some youth also reported personal growth in terms of self-discovery and identity development.

Youth-adult partnerships

All adult leaders were viewed as a resource. Teens that completed the action plans, received as well as perceived, a great amount of support from parents, adult leaders, and adult volunteers from their organization and from community members. Youth made use of the adults in areas such as connecting with community service professionals, obtaining financial resources, and in organizing transportation. Youth appeared to benefit whether adults took a mentorship or a partnership approach. When youth spoke of adults as partners, youth did most of the planning themselves. Youth-adult teams outlined a process of working together to understand a common goal. The goal helped participants come together as a group. Feelings of commitment and loyalty to adult leaders and the group motivated them to complete the project.

When adults mentored, youth sensed high expectations from adults. Youth said they did not believe they could accomplish their often ambitious goals, but having adults believe in them provided the momentum to achieve their aims. Adult involvement in supporting youth efforts was perceived as not only helpful, but as an affirmation of the importance of youths' work.

Success and impact of the projects

From our follow-up conversations with community 4-H YDP staff, we found that larger, long term projects were ongoing. For instance, the initiation of the community based garden led to a new respect of the neighborhood among community members. In the case of teens developing an environmental education program for fourth and fifth graders, the schools have developed an environmental program around the program presented by the teens and built this into their curriculum.

Discussion

Overall, we found that the amount of time youth invested in a project impacted their experience. Youth who expended more than six months completing the plan expressed a sense of satisfaction and connection with others. We also found that some teams were unable to become engaged, or embrace the team concept, and in the future would suggest capitalizing on the increased energy and enthusiasm by immediate follow-up after the summits. Adults might encourage written articles in local newspapers to create greater community awareness and support of the teams' action plans.

We believe the summits were a success because youth were given an active voice on community issues which not only enhanced positive youth development but also benefited

communities. We also believe youth learned more about civic participation. Youth mentioned learning to work with the "system." In projects where they had to work with people in the community, they obtained a new understanding of collaborative processes.

We offer our experience on the summit process to other youth professionals in the hope they too will use summits to further positive youth development.

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