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## Youth Motivations for Program Participation

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**Abstract:** Through their participation in youth programs, young people have access to opportunities to learn and build important skills. A total of 214 youth between the ages of 10-19 (mean 15.5 years) completed an online survey about characteristics of youth programs they participated in, didn't participate in, and had participated in but quit. We found that youth participated in activities that provided a benefit to meet personal goals or develop skills. However, our findings suggest that youth may leave activities, or never join them, based on different sets of motivations than the reasons they stay in activities. There was variability across demographic groups: Males reported more problems with past activities, sexual minority youth were more likely to endorse social problems with past and never joined activities, and ethnic minorities reported less support for personal goals and connection to adults in current activities and more logistic barriers for activities never joined.

## Introduction

While there is growing evidence that participation in a youth program can promote the positive development of today's young people (Durlak et al., 2007; Eccles & Gutman, 2002; Finlay, Flanagan, & Wray-Lake, 2011) there is limited information pertaining to what influences a young person's decision to participate or not participate in these programs. Through their participation in youth programs, young people have access to opportunities to learn and build important skills. Studies find that, compared to family and community factors, time spent in youth programs is the most consistent predictor of youth thriving (Borden, Perkins, Villarruel, Carlton Hug, Stone, & Keith, 2006). Participation in youth programs has been shown to offer young people the opportunity to acquire: a positive identity; respect for others; decision-making skills; positive values; family and community support; meaningful roles and empowerment; new physical, social, and intellectual skills; opportunities to develop and express passion and creativity; constructive use of time; and meaningful relationships with adults (Earls & Carlson, 2002; Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Hart, 1992; Lee, Borden, Serido, & Perkins, 2009; Mahoney, Larson, & Eccles, 2005; Perkins, Borden, & Villarruel, 2001; Scales & Leffert, 1999; Serido, Borden & Perkins, 2011). Youth program participation has also been found to be negatively associated with substance use, antisocial behavior and delinquency, school misconduct and failure, and early unprotected sex (Dryfoos, 1998; Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992; Mahatmya, & Lohman, 2011; Oetting & Donnermeyer, 1998; Perkins & Borden, 2003). Staff practices can serve to further enhance the positive benefits of involvement for youth. Specifically, welcoming and active-skill-building were associated with youth experiences of engagement and belonging (Akiva, Cortina, Eccles, & Smith, 2013). The experiences within a youth development program offer young people a number of positive benefits.

Youth development programs can also, unfortunately provide a context for negative experiences and interactions. Some programs find that youth gain access to older peers in programs that can contribute opportunities for gaining access to alcohol (Eccles & Barber, 1999), or participating in other risk behaviors. Youth may also have negative experiences in youth programs with high levels of stress (Scanlan, Babkes, & Scanlan, 2005). An unanticipated consequence of negative experiences would be avoidance of similar programs in the future. For instance, Dworkin and Larson (2006) delineated five types of negative youth program experiences: aversive peer behavior, formation of cliques, poor cooperation, negative peer influences, and being ridiculed for group membership. Many of these behaviors mimic the research that ethnic and sexual minority group members report about school climates, and ways that they are excluded or limited in the school context (Saewyc, 2011). Marginalized populations report lower activity participation rates due to fewer culturally sensitive options and mentors (Villarruel, Montero-Sieburth, Dunbar, & Outley, 2005). Negative experiences with an adult program leader can add to the burden of negative experiences with youth participants and reduce the capacity of that adult to have positive relationships and facilitate positive youth relationships in the program (Rhodes, 2002). Additionally peer conflict can mitigate other potential positive program benefits (Larson et al., 2005).

Youth development is well grounded theoretically in developmental science (Lerner & Overton, 2008; Lerner et al., 2005; Linver, Roth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2009; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003b). Linver et al. (2009) state that,

...the theory of positive youth development, rooted in contextual theories of developmental psychology and the experiences of youth workers, stresses the plasticity of human development to propose that mutually beneficial relationship between the individual and his or her ecology enhance the likelihood of healthy developmental outcomes (p. 354).

It is very clear that young people are active agents in their own growth; young people drive their own development (Larson, 2006; Larson & Walker, 2005).

Participation in youth programs also assists youth in overcoming adversity, thereby increasing their willingness to engage in efforts to help others, enhancing leadership qualities, increasing their efforts to maintain good physical health, and expanding their involvement in political and social activities in young adulthood (Holland & Andre, 1987; Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000; Scales & Leffert, 1999; Quinn, 1995). These experiences often provide young people a first opportunity for a meaningful connection to their communities (Zeldin, 2000), including caring adults (Lee et al., 2009; Serido et al., 2011), and an opportunity to engage in civic actions/education (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Finlay, Flanagan, & Wray-Lake, 2011; Lerner, 2004; Nicholson, Collins, & Homer, 2004). Thus, the decision to participate or not participate in a youth program must be understood from a young person's own decisions regarding a particular context. Given the potential benefit from participating it is important that we conduct studies that will provide much needed information regarding participation and nonparticipation.

### **The Process of Successful Transitions through Program Participation**

Despite our understanding of the importance of youth participation for positive development, much less is known about the processes through which program participation promotes positive outcomes and thus facilitates successful transitions to adulthood (Benson, 2003). Gambone and Arbretton (1997) studied youth who attended activities at the YMCA or Boys & Girls Club. They found that youth reported "fun" as the motivation for their participation. The same study found that young women who participated in activities at Girls, Inc. more frequently cited the opportunity to learn things and relationships with caring adults at the program as the main motivations for participation. Latino, African American, and other youth interviewed at a teen center in Texas indicated that they participate because a teen center is a fun, safe place that provides something to do such as; opportunities for social interactions with peers, an escape from home, and a chance to learn healthy behaviors, and achieve improved academic performance (Baker & Hultsman, 1998). The same study asked youth to explain reasons teens did *not* participate in programs at the teen center. One of the most frequently-mentioned explanations for why youth did not attend programs was that they perceived the center to be "boring." Another reason cited for non-participation was that some youth might be involved in drugs and alcohol, which could keep them from participating (Baker & Hultsman, 1998). Perkins et al. (2007) studied participation of ethnically diverse youth and found that young people emphasized the value of youth programs for providing a safe place that keeps them off the streets and away from trouble. In every brainstorming session, youth mentioned this as a very important reason for participation. Sexual minority youth may have a specific additional set of reasons for participating or not in programs, and also experience a distinct context from their heterosexual peers depending on the program (Toomey & Russell, 2013).

## The Present Study

While the benefits of youth programs for promoting positive development is well-defined, little is known about why youth do or do not participate in programs. Even less is known about why youth may stop participating in a program. While program providers and researchers have speculated and to a much lesser extent examined factors associated with joining and leaving activities, the nature of youth decisions to participate or not, and to quit participating is fundamentally not understood. This study seeks to examine structural, personal and interpersonal benefits and barriers to activities in an attempt to begin to develop an understanding of youth decisions regarding activity participation. Because so little is known about this topic, we took an exploratory approach: asking youth to rate many factors in considering a current activity, a past activity that they were involved in but no longer are, and an activity they never joined.

Many studies have documented that youth participation in youth programs can contribute to a variety of positive developmental outcomes such as life skill development and identity development (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001; Bridges, Margie, & Zaff, 2001; Durlak et al., 2007; Greenberg, Domitrovich, & Bumbarger, 1999; Hair, Jager, & Garrett, 2001; Larson, 2000; Redd, Cochran, Hair, & Moore, 2002; Schinke, Cole, & Poulin, 2000; Villarruel, Perkins, Borden, & Keith, 2003). Moreover, the release of the report by the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine's Committee on Community-Level Programs for Youth further underscores the value of youth involvement in programs that foster a variety of personal and social assets that adolescents need to develop to become healthy and contributing members of society (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Finlay, Flanagan, & Wray-Lake, 2011).

One of the major recommendations from Eccles and Gootman (2002) is that programs must be made available to all youth. Yet, there is limited research documenting the reasons youth in general choose to participate or not to participate in youth programs (Weiss et al., 2005). This may be in part due to the complexity of reasons that motivate or inhibit youth participation in community-based programs. Some studies have viewed participation as a dependent variable and have thus been able to reveal individual, peer, and family factors that are linked to adolescents' participation in after-school activities. While not examining adolescents' decisions directly, these studies are nevertheless informative. Other factors found to be associated with participation in community or school-based activities include parent endorsement and modeling of activity involvement (Fletcher, Elder, & Mekos, 2000), ethnicity (Lee et al., 2009), acculturation (Davalos, Chavez, & Guardiola, 1999) and having friends who endorsed the activity (Huebner & Mancini, 2003).

Gender has also been found to predict patterns of activity participation. Girls have been found to prefer social (Passmore & French, 2001), prosocial, and performance activities (such as dance and band), as well as school involvement activities, such as student government and pep club (Eccles & Barber, 1999). Males were more likely to report participation in sports (Davalos, et al., 1999; Eccles & Barber, 1999). Another gender related finding concerns constraints on activity participation: Girls were more likely to report such constraints as self-consciousness, shyness, and the need for approval from friends (Raymore, Godbey, & Crawford, 1994).

In their qualitative study of urban ethnic minority youth, Perkins and colleagues (2007) found that youth emphasized the value of youth programs for providing a safe place that keeps them

away from trouble. Another notable finding from their study was the value youth placed on the learning that takes place in youth programs. For instance, the foreign-born youth mentioned how the programs offered assistance in learning English to help them fit in with United States' culture. Moreover, every group mentioned the types of skills that could be learned (e.g., conflict resolution, career skills, self-confidence, and cultural skills) as a reason for participation. A later study suggested that different ethnic groups might experience different adult relationship benefits across programs (Lee et al., 2009), and that the consequential relationships with adults were related to acquisition of voice, and enhanced participation (Serido et al., 2011). Finally, youth's psychological engagement with an activity has been linked to enhanced benefits of participation, beyond any influence of amount of time spent participating (McGuire & Gamble, 2006). Together these findings suggest that a focus on youth's motivations for participation could be fruitful for understanding program benefits.

Overall, there have been just a few studies that have considered the perceptions of youth regarding what factors motivate participation in youth programs and what factors function as deterrents to participation. The current study examines the factors that youth report influence their decision to participate in after school programs. Our methods and analyses proceed with the intent to address the following three research questions:

- First, what are the reasons that youth do or do not participate in, or quit, activities? Analyses to this end will focus on refinement of the measures for each of the three constructs.
- Second, are different considerations more or less salient when considering incentives to participate versus deterrents to participation?
- And third, are there major demographic group differences in reasons to participate in, not participate in, or quit an activity. Demographic comparisons will focus on gender, sexual minority status, ethnicity, rural versus urban residence, and age.

## Methods

### Sample

Participants were recruited via frontline youth workers through various means including: newsletters in Harvard Family Research Project and National Association of Extension 4-H Agents, a listserv sponsored by National 4-H Youth Development, the Society for Research on Adolescence's Special Interest Group on Out-of-School Time, and the National Youth Development Information Center for Children, Youth and Families at Risk.

A total of 214 youth between the ages of 10-19 (mean 15.5 years; 75% female) completed at least one section of the online survey. Not all youth completed every section of the online survey. Among the 185 youth who completed the descriptive section of the survey, most (67%) were white, the rest were African American (10%), Latina/o (3%), Native American (1%), Asian (5%), mixed race (7%) or other (3%). Ninety-five percent were born in the U.S. Forty percent lived in large urban centers, 47% lived in rural locations, and 13% lived in small cities. About half (52%) had mothers with a college degree or higher, and almost all (92%) expected to receive a college degree or higher. Three-quarters (78%) reported average grades in the "A and B" range. Half did not have jobs, 35% worked 10 hours a week or less and the remaining 15% worked more than 10 hours a week. Most (68%) had mothers who worked at least part time. Sixty-one percent attended church, and 74% described religion as somewhat or very important. Thirteen percent reported romantic attractions to the same sex or both sexes.

## Procedures

The items for this study were developed and vetted with young people in our prior work (see Borden et al., 2006; Perkins et al., 2007) utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methods to examine the reasons youth from various racial and ethnic groups (African American, Arab American, Chaldean, and Latina/o) choose to participate in youth programs. These youth, who were themselves all active in community-based youth programs, were asked to offer reasons young people participate in youth programs as well as why they felt their non-participating peers chose not to participate. The methods for collecting and rating reasons offered by youth participants are based on the Concept Systems methodology (Trochim, 1989) Concept mapping is a structured conceptualization which involves brainstorming, sorting, and ranking as three distinct phases of data collection that when combined reveal a conceptual framework presented as a relational data map. Findings from the brainstorming session are presented in a separate manuscript (Perkins et al., 2007).

Participants completed an online survey about extracurricular activities. Questions were asked about three different activities: a current activity (n = 214), a past activity (n = 177), and an activity they never joined (n = 144). The questions were similar, but not identical, for each activity. Participants rated reactions to the activities with questions worded to address current, past and never done activities such as "I like it," "I didn't like it," or "I didn't think I would like it." Responses were on a 1-5 likert scale with 1 being "not true" and 5 being "very true." The survey contained a total of 170 items, and required about 40 minutes to complete.

## Analyses

We start with descriptions of youth's responses to a current activity, a past activity and a never joined activity. Next, we utilize exploratory factor analyses to examine the underlying constructs present for each of the three types of activities. The purpose of the factor analyses is to see if different patterns of reasons for engaging in, leaving, and not engaging in activities would emerge. For the descriptive analyses and factor analyses, the data include all youth who completed the relevant sections. Finally, comparisons among participants are made for each of the newly created scales based on age (M = 15.5), sex (75% female), ethnic minority status (33%), sexual minority status (13%), church attendance (61%), and urban residence (40%).

## Results

### Descriptive Analyses

Table 1 presents the highest endorsements about a current activity, a past activity, and a never joined activity. When considering simple endorsements, youth focused on the value of an activity for their own development across all three types of activities. Having an activity that was important to them, related to their goals, and they had time for was important. Also, the role of siblings and family were top scorers for activities participants had left or never joined, but were not among the top scorers for current activities, suggesting that families may function more strongly to discourage participation in activities than in providing support for doing an activity. The ratings of the top five current activities were much higher (all 4.5 or higher out of 5.0) than endorsements for past activities (range 2.8-3.6 out of 5) or activities never joined (range 2.9-3.6 out of 5), indicating stronger feelings about current activities than past or never joined activities.

**Table 1**

*Most frequently endorsed statements about a current and past activity,  
and one never joined*

	<b>Current Activity</b>	<b>Past Activity</b>	<b>Never Joined Activity</b>
1 <sup>st</sup>	Important to me	Was not a varsity sport	Siblings didn't do it
2 <sup>nd</sup>	People speak same language	Siblings didn't do it	Family not involved
3 <sup>rd</sup>	I learn new things	Didn't meet dates	I was too busy
4 <sup>th</sup>	I like it	Did not relate to goals	Did not relate to goals
5 <sup>th</sup>	I improve skills	I was too busy	Wasn't important to me

### **Factor Analyses**

To better understand the underlying factors that influence youth's participation, factor analyses were run within each of the three types of activities. Table 2 presents a summary of the factors that best represent each of the three activities, current, past, and never joined.

**Table 2**

*Factors and loadings across three activity types: Current activity, past activity, and never joined activity.*

<i>Current Activity</i>	<i>Loading</i>	<i>Past Activity</i>	<i>Loading</i>	<i>Never Joined Activity</i>	<i>Loading</i>
<i>Support for personal goals</i>					
<i>Factor 1</i>					
Learn about myself	0.715	Factor 3 People didn't look up to me	0.814	Factor 3 Wasn't important to me	0.798
Make good decisions	0.715	Didn't make difference to	0.716	It wasn't important to me	0.789
Learn about future	0.711	Not answer ?s about future	0.705	Wouldn't be good	0.779
Relates to my goals	0.699	Not relate to goals	0.704	Wouldn't like it	0.767
Role model	0.688	Not improve skills	0.694	Not relate to goals	0.751
I play leadership role	0.686	Wasn't important to me	0.677	Wouldn't like belonging	0.735
Get to help people	0.681	Didn't have leadership role	0.668	People wouldn't look up to me	0.695
Makes a difference	0.618	Didn't like belonging	0.655	Wouldn't make difference to	0.689
Important to me	0.542	Not make good decisions	0.654	Not answer ?s about future	0.648
Improve skills	0.533	I didn't like it	0.602	No time with friends	0.599
I am good at it	0.532	Didn't learn new things	0.580	Didn't have leadership role	0.563
I learn new things	0.515	I wasn't good at it	0.456	Wouldn't meet dates	0.489
Stay out of trouble	0.471	Not healthy	0.435		
I like belonging	0.389	Not stay out of trouble	0.434		
Consistent with values	0.367	Didn't meet dates	0.407		
I liked a similar activity	0.356	Family not involved	0.353		
Doesn't cost too much	0.321	Was not a varsity sport	0.265		
<i>Family Involvement</i>					
<i>Factor 2</i>					
Family is involved	0.655			Factor 4 Siblings didn't do it	0.765
Parents want me to	0.631			Parents didn't want me to	0.588
Be healthy	0.612			Family not involved	0.573
Sibling does it	0.582			Friends didn't do it	0.560
Varsity sport	0.470			Not healthy	0.433
Required to participate	0.374				



**Table 2 (con't)**

<i>Connection to Youth</i>	<i>Connection to Adults and Youth</i>	<i>Connection to Adults and Youth</i>
<i>Factor 3</i>		
For youth my age	0.711	
Other youth are fun	0.698	
Time with friends	0.664	
Other youth care about me	0.636	
Speaks same language	0.596	
Other youth are nice	0.523	
Friends do it	0.479	
Other youth are like me	0.435	
Right amount of rules	0.422	
Transportation is easy	0.419	
Meet people to date	0.413	
Get to know different youth	0.396	
Offered in my community	0.380	
<i>Connection to Adults</i>		
<i>Factor 4</i>		
I like the adults	-0.866	
Adults listen	-0.814	
The adults care about me	-0.779	
I feel safe	-0.590	
Like the values of the group	-0.590	
I like it	-0.563	
Adults are like me	-0.516	
Different from school	-0.376	
<i>Factor 1</i>		
Adults didn't listen to me		0.847
Adults didn't care about me		0.814
Youth weren't nice to me		0.809
Didn't like the adults		0.804
Other youth didn't care about me		0.765
Didn't like the values		0.748
Youth weren't fun		0.707
Didn't feel safe		0.619
Didn't get to help people		0.584
Adults weren't like me		0.560
Youth weren't like me		0.543
Too many rules		0.528
No time with friends		0.519
Didn't get to know different youth		0.515
Friends didn't do it		0.502
Not consistent with values		0.438
Parents didn't want me to		0.413
Siblings didn't do it		0.237
<i>Factor 1</i>		
Other youth didn't care about me		0.835
Adults didn't listen to me		0.819
Youth weren't nice to me		0.808
Didn't like the adults		0.800
Adults didn't care about me		0.798
Youth weren't fun		0.746
Didn't get to know different youth		0.642
Didn't like the values		0.638
Youth weren't like me		0.623
Wouldn't learn new things		0.613
Adults weren't like me		0.586
Didn't get to help people		0.585
Wouldn't feel safe		0.453



### ***Current Activity***

For the first set of questions about a current activity, a strong primary factor (eigenvalue = 10.2, accounting for 23.2% of variance) and three secondary factors emerged (eigenvalues = 3.0, 2.7 and 2.1, accounting for 6.7%, 6.2% and 4.9% of variance respectively). With a one-factor solution, factor loadings ranged from .57-.82. Two-, three-, and four-factor solutions were attempted and in each case were able to converge with oblimin rotation. The two-factor solution yielded uneven factors (one with 8 items, the other with 36), and resulted in more than ten items with unacceptably low factor loadings (below .4). The three-factor solution was an improvement. However, still more than ten items had factor loadings that were unacceptably low. The four factor solution yielded factors that based on the items included were labeled: 1) Support for personal goals, 2) family involvement/ enjoyment, 3) connection to other youth, 4) connection to adults (see table 2 for individual items). Eight items had low factor loadings between .3-.4. A four-factor solution seemed to best fit these items while retaining the value of the multiple diverse variables. Reports of reliability analyses are reported in table 3.

### ***Past Activity***

For the second set of questions about a past activity the respondent used to participate in but did not anymore, a strong primary factor (eigenvalue = 13.4, accounting for 27.9% of variance) and two secondary factors emerged (eigenvalues = 3.7 and 2.3, accounting for 7.8% and 4.7% of variance respectively). With a one-factor solution, factor loadings ranged from .46-.87. A two-factor solution converged, but yielded low factor scores for too many of the items to be considered viable. A three-factor solution yielded factors with some high loading items and other lower loading items. Because the three factors are conceptually distinct, and because our goal is to describe variability in youths' motivations for participation, a three factor solution was deemed superior. The three-factors in content represented: 1) social difficulty with either the adults or youth in the activity, 2) failure of the activity to support individual goals, and 3) difficulty with the logistics or generalized barriers (see table 2). Reports of reliability analyses are reported in table 3.

### ***Never-joined Activity***

For the third set of questions about a never joined activity, a principal components analyses yielded one primary factor (eigenvalue = 15.3, accounting for 31.8% of variance) with factor loadings ranging from .58-.86. Because there were seven other eigenvalues over 1.0, oblimin rotations were attempted with 2 through 7 factor solutions. The two-factor solution was able to converge, but the factor loadings were significantly lower on each factor than they had been in the one factor solution. The first factor represented failure of the activity to meet goals and problems with interpersonal issues, the second factor included structural barriers. While this two factor solution was not entirely unacceptable, the low factor loadings, and failure to distinguish interpersonal issues from personal goals seemed like enough reason not to use it. Oblimin rotation with 3, 4, 5, or 7 primary factors failed to converge. A six-factor solution converged with acceptable factor loadings for most variables, and significant distinction across the factors. For this reason, the six factor solution was chosen. The factors include 1) interpersonal difficulties with the youth or adults in the program, 2) general structural barriers, 3) failure of activity to support personal goals, 4) lack of participation by participant's social network (family and friends), 5) general apathy, 6) did not think activity would enhance self (see table 2). Reports of reliability analyses are reported in table 3.

**Table 3**  
*Created scales*

Scale name		Number of items	$\alpha$	M	SD	Group differences
<i>Current Activity</i>						
Factor 1	Support for personal goals	17	.88	4.02	.68	Male, EM-Urban-
Factor 2	Family involvement	6	.64	2.69	.93	Ch., Urban-
Factor 3	Connection to other youth	13	.82	4.02	.64	Ch., Urban-
Factor 4	Connection to adults	8	.84	4.17	.75	Age, EM-Urban-
<i>Past Activity</i>						
Factor 1	Social difficulty - adults or youth	21	.92	1.95	.80	Male, SM
Factor 2	Logistics or general barriers	13	.83	1.82	.73	Male
Factor 3	Failure to support personal goals	17	.88	2.45	.90	Male
<i>Never Joined Activity</i>						
Factor 1	Anticipated social difficulty	13	.93	1.88	.93	SM
Factor 2	Logistics or general barriers	8	.77	1.80	.77	EM
Factor 3	Anticipated failure to support goals	12	.92	2.55	1.16	Age
Factor 4	Lack of family /friend involvement	5	.67	2.82	1.06	
Factor 5	General apathy	6	.75	2.10	.92	
Factor 6	Anticipated failure to enhance self	4	.81	1.85	1.06	SM

Finally, demographic comparisons were made across the computed scales for each type of activity. Table 3 summarizes the demographic differences across scales. Age was positively correlated with connection to adults in a current activity ( $r = .18$ ) and anticipated failure of an activity never joined to support personal goals ( $r = .20$ ). Males more strongly endorsed the value of a current activity in supporting personal goals, and each of the three factors representing a past activity: 1) social difficulty with either the adults or youth in the activity, 2) failure of the activity to support individual goals, and 3) difficulty with the logistics or generalized barriers. Sexual minority students were more likely to endorse social difficulty with either adults or youth as features of a past activity, as well as anticipated interpersonal difficulties with the youth or adults in the program, and not thinking an activity would enhance themselves as features of a never joined activity. Participants who attended church were more likely to endorse family involvement/ enjoyment, and connection to other youth as features of a

current activity. Ethnic minority participants were less likely to report that a current activity provided support for personal goals or connection to adults, and were more likely to report general structural barriers to an activity never joined. Urban participants were less likely than rural participants to endorse all of the features of a current activity: 1) Support for personal goals, 2) family involvement/ enjoyment, 3) connection to other youth, and 4) connection to adults.

## Discussion

We found that youth participated in activities that provided a benefit to meet personal goals and develop skills, as well as connect them to other youth and adults. However, our findings suggest that youth may leave activities, or never join them, based on different sets of motivations than the reasons they stay in activities. For instance, social difficulties and anticipated social difficulties with both youth and adults were the primary factors associated with leaving activities, and activities never joined. This finding is consistent with other studies that have shown the importance of caring adults as a factor in more frequent program participation (Gambone & Arbreton, 1997). Youth may be drawn in, and to some extent retained in activities based on perceived support for personal goals; but interpersonal conflicts may play a stronger role in driving youth out of programs.

It is important to understand that youth may participate in activities for different reasons than they leave activities or never participate in them. Structural barriers seem to be relevant for participation, but are not the driving force between participating and not participating. Thus, in the measurement of participation, it would be wise to focus on perceived benefits for life goals. Conversely, in the measurement of non-participation, it may be more appropriate to focus on the enhancement of, or problems with interpersonal relationships. Perceived benefits will draw young people in and keep them interested. However, they will need to develop interpersonal connections or they risk dropping out (Lee et al., 2009; Serido et al., 2011). A positive connection to adults was a different factor than positive connection to youth as features of current participation. However, a negative connection to either grouped together as a feature of leaving an activity. That is youth reported separately a connection to youth or a connection to adults as a feature of a program they were currently in. However problems with anyone in the program, either youth or adults, were features of programs youth had quit. The value of positive social interactions with peers (Baker & Hultsman, 1998; Huebner & Mancini, 2003) and adults (Gambone & Arbreton, 1997) for program involvement has been supported in the literature.

There was considerable variability across demographic groups in factors associated with participation, leaving an activity, and choosing not to participate. Males reported higher levels of problems with past activities. Sexual minority youth were more likely to report social problems or anticipated social problems with past and never joined activities, indicating concerns with "fitting in" that corroborate evidence of social exclusion of this group (Russell & McGuire, 2006). Ethnic minorities reported less support for personal goals and connection to adults in current activities and more logistical barriers for activities never joined. These findings shed light on implicit discriminatory factors that may be creating a less comfortable and supportive environment for minority youth. More research specifically focused on factors associated with participation and retention of minority groups is needed (Finlay, Flanagan, & Wray-Lake, 2011;

Lee et al., 2009). The existing literature suggests that positive program experiences for ethnic minorities can support a greater sense of belonging (Perkins et al., 2007).

Youth who were church-goers were more likely to report family involvement and connection to other youth as features of a current activity, which reflects the high probability the activity they reported on was a church oriented youth program. Other studies support the importance of family and peer involvement with or endorsement of activities for youth engagement (Fletcher, Elder, & Mekos, 2000; Huebner & Mancini, 2003). Taken together, these findings suggest that reasons to participate may be driven by a different set of motivations than reasons to quit or not join a program.

### **Implications for Youth Development Practice**

For youth development professionals, findings from the current study translate into two distinct sets of program goals: one focused on stimulating program engagement, and another focused on retaining participants. Strategies to stimulate engagement may be most salient for youth when focused on how activities can promote their personal goals. Retention may be better stimulated through a focus on positive social relationships among youth participants and leaders.

More specifically, recruitment to programs exists separately from retention in programs and youth may leave a program they would otherwise value based on negative interactions with peers and staff. Further, specific minority groups report an even greater likelihood of responsiveness to the social and emotional factors of a program. In order to keep youth invested in positive youth development programs, particularly sexual and ethnic minority youth, programs must work specifically to create a positive relational environment among the youth and between the youth and the adult program leaders.

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