Recruitment and Retention in Youth Development Programs

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INTRODUCTION

Youth development programs frequently struggle with recruitment and participant retention. Efforts to provide opportunities for positive youth development require young participants to show up for programs and stay involved over time. Adolescents join and remain in programs based on a mix of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and contextual factors, such as self-identity, friends who also attend the program, and hours that fit their schedules. Several approaches to understanding these factors show that youth are active agents in their own development (Lerner, 2005), are influenced by their ecology, or social surroundings (Brofenbrenner, 1998), and consciously plan their behaviors (Ajzen, 1991).

The following Research to Practice Points are based on several positive assumptions about young people:
- Youth have power and ability to make conscious decisions about their own activity involvements and behaviors.
- Youth experience multiple influences on their program participation.
- Youth desire the opportunity to engage in "voice and choice."
- Authentic representation and participation of youth at all program levels are crucial to recruitment and retention efforts.

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE POINTS
- When youth are authentically represented and feel ownership of programs, they are more likely to be attracted to and remain in programs.
- Youth programs provide opportunities for young people to explore, commit to, and express their identities.
- Programs provide youth with welcoming settings that facilitate social and contextual interactions.
- Social and peer factors influence youths' decisions to attend or remain in programs.
- Program-level policies and procedures should reflect developmentally appropriate supports and opportunities for positive outcomes for young participants.

DETAILS ON RESEARCH TO PRACTICE POINTS

When youth are authentically represented and feel ownership of programs, they are more likely to be attracted to and remain in programs.
Larson (2006) suggests that youth development is created and accomplished by young people themselves, rather than imposed by adults. Ajzen (1991) proposed the Theory of Planned Behavior that suggests that people behave in particular ways through

a combination of motivation and ability. Youth who are motivated to engage in activities are more likely to report psychological well-being (Hunter and Csikszentmihalyi, 2003) supporting their continued interest and involvement.

Youth programs provide diverse opportunities for young people to explore, commit to, and express their identities.
An important task as youth grow is identity development, which is formed through a combination of internal motivation, exploration, and commitment (Waterman, 2004). Activities that are personally expressive tend to involve connections with others, substantial effort, and feelings of competence (Waterman, 2004). Programs can expose youth to a variety of new and different goals, values, and beliefs. Such exposure to opportunities for positive identity development is appealing to youth.

Programs provide youth with welcoming settings that facilitate social and contextual interactions.
Ecological theory suggests that youth development occurs through a process of interactions within and between individuals and their environmental contexts (Brofenbrenner, 1998), including peers, family, social class, cultural groups, and school. These contexts take on varying degrees of importance in an adolescent's decision-making processes related to program attendance. When designing programs to recruit and retain youth, understand other contexts through which youth live their lives and the influences that such contexts have to facilitate or inhibit participation.

Social and peer factors influence youths' decisions to attend or remain in programs.
Programs help foster close friendships because many youth attend to have fun with friends (Loder and Hirsch, 2003). Fredricks and Eccles (2005) found positive connections associated with a pro-social peer group, program participation, and positive adjustment. However, Dworkin and Larson (2004) found negative experiences within youth programs most frequently involved peers and peer group dynamics, such as aversive behavior, cliques, and negative group dynamics, as well as off-putting adult leader behavior such as playing favorites or disrespecting and upsetting youth.

Program-level policies and procedures should reflect developmentally appropriate supports and opportunities for positive outcomes for young participants.
Developmental appropriateness is one of several checkpoints for planning recruitment and retention strategies. In addition, Eccles and Gootman (2002) identified eight features of developmental settings that are critical to quality youth programs: physical and psychological safety, appropriate structure, supportive relationships, opportunities to belong, positive social norms, support for efficacy and mattering, opportunities for skill building, and integration of family, school, and community efforts.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Organizations often pay too little attention to recruitment and retention practices, and examine practices only when attendance falls below some threshold. The following recommendations should be considered when assessing current organizational effectiveness in attracting and retaining youth in programs. Well thought-out and integrated recruitment and retention plans are critical to maximize positive influences on youth. To be successful, practitioners of any plan must understand that youth's time and attention is limited, and that retention is ongoing active recruitment. Strategies that encompass most or all of the following considerations are crucial for success.

- *Intentional Programming*. Programs should be designed and implemented with youth input and reflect the needs and aspirations of the participants.
- *Safety*. In order to recruit and retain youth, young participants need to feel emotionally and physically safe. A safe place does not tolerate, accept, or support violence and aggression. Protecting individuals from bullying due to sexual orientation, ability, gender, ethnicity, or any other reason is also critical.
- *Attendance Incentives*. While participation in programs may be internally rewarding for some adolescents, others, especially those new to the program, may benefit from initial rewards for participation. However, in most cases, incentives should be decreased once staff members believe the young participant has shifted from external to internal motivations to attend.
- *Community Service.* Meaningful, youth-initiated service opportunities can improve adolescents' connections to their communities, job skills, self-esteem, and the organization. Opportunities for meaningful community service can be

powerful tools for recruiting and retaining participants.

- *Program Promotion.* Youth hear about programs both formally and informally, and engage in activities that they feel are aligned with their identities. In addition, youth listen to the "buzz" —both positive and negative—concerning the quality of program activities and staff. Positive buzz is more powerful than flyers and emails.
- *Family Involvement*. If family members believe in and support their children's participation in a program, young people are more likely to attend. Family members can be resources and volunteers for the program.
- *Appropriate Staffing*. Programs need to hire and support caring, respectful adults who are committed to engaging youth voice, choice, and participation, and who can relate to young people. Participants stay in programs because caring staff and friends are there.
- *Youth-Friendly Facilities.* A comfortable setting helps young people feel at ease. Youth can become attached to the positive environment found at the program site.
- *Collaborations and Partnerships.* Collaborating with other youth-serving organizations is a cost-effective way to fill programming gaps and recruit new participants.
- *Access and Transportation*. Easy and safe travel to and from programs can result in increased attendance.
- *Evaluation.* Assessing program- and participant-level characteristics and outcomes can provide information for future program refinements and targeted recruitment and retention strategies. Including youth in the evaluation process can facilitate stronger youth buy-in, and encourage the development of critical thinking skills.

AREAS WHERE ADDITIONAL RESEARCH IS NEEDED

Examine the "black box"—the processes that go on during a program—between participation in a program and participant outcomes. How much participation is enough and for which desired outcomes? How do young people's contexts support or constrain program participation? What recruitment and retention efforts are developmentally appropriate? Program evaluation research is especially useful for investigating these questions (Lauver and Little, 2005).

In addition, recruitment and retention models should be tested to better understand connections between practices and outcomes. For example, the Harvard Family Research Project proposed a conceptual model of youth participation in programs (Weiss, Little, and Bouffard, 2005). This model suggests that participation consists of enrollment, attendance, and engagement. Participation is also influenced by access to programs and program quality. Predictors of participation include child characteristics, family, school, and neighborhood factors. These predictors, as well as access to programs, program quality, and youth participation, influence youth outcomes. In a climate of increasing requirements to demonstrate program efficacy and value, careful attention to recruitment and retention efforts is crucial for program security and longevity.

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