Paper Presentation
Topic: Innovations and Good Practices in Volunteering

Mobilizing (and Understanding!)
Teens as Volunteer Teachers

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Abstract

Engaging teens in meaningful leadership roles has become a major focus of many contemporary not-for-profit organizations. Today's cultural and political climates demand that community-based organizations approach youth not as mere recipients of programs, nor even as mere resources in program development, but rather as valued and equal partners in the holistic program development, implementation, and evaluation process. The cross-peer, cross-generational North Carolina Teens Reaching Youth through Innovative Teams! (TRY-IT!) program engages teens as volunteer teachers of other youth and adults in their communities. TRY-IT! is designed around the "Four E's" of working with teens as volunteers: Empathy, Engagement, Enrichment, and Empowerment.

Introduction

All youth, and especially those in their teens, also need to be engaged in their communities through volunteerism and service that allows them to actively participate in decisions affecting themselves and their families, schools, workplaces, and communities. Brendtro and Bacon (1995) suggested that such active involvement in decision making assists teens in developing both responsibility and commitment. Swinehart (1992) defined youth engagement as having four components: (1) including youth in significant decision making; (2) youth participating in activities that satisfy a genuine need in their community; (3) youth developing collegial relationships with adult partners and mentors; and (4) youth reflecting on their work and learning skills related to it.

Engaging teens in meaningful leadership roles has become a major focus of many contemporary not-for-profit organizations. Today's cultural and political climates demand that community-based organizations approach youth not as mere recipients of programs, nor even as mere resources in program development, but rather as valued and equal partners in the holistic program development, implementation, and evaluation process. As Long et al. (n.d.) noted: "[There is ample] evidence that weaving the work of youth development, civic development, and community development makes sense for three important reasons: First, young people, who make up 26 percent of the population, possess vision, creativity and energy that is largely

untapped. They have much to contribute to organizations and communities. Second, young people, when called to action, contribute to their own development, as well as to the development of the common good. And third, constructive action and involvement are always and everywhere the best defense against school failure, drug and alcohol abuse, teen pregnancy, crime, and violence – pathologies society cannot afford to remediate, even if it knew how to" (p. 3).

Theoretical Base

Teens seek active, meaningful engagement in their communities (Zeldin et al., 2000.) Numerous studies have highlighted teens' desires and initiatives to work together with peers and adults as leaders in addressing the serious issues facing us as a society (Safrit & Auck, 2003; Safrit, 2003; Safrit & King, 1999; Youth Service America, 1994). Studies have indicated that participation in voluntary structured activities during nonschool time is associated with the development of positive identity, increased initiative, and positive relationships with diverse peers and adults, better school achievement, reduced rates of dropping out of school, reduced delinquency, and more positive outcomes in adulthood (Clark, 1988; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Larson, 2000; Vandell & Posner, 1999). In return for their active engagement in the community, teens both experience intrinsic satisfaction and expect extrinsic rewards that enable them to be successful both today and into the future. Safrit, Scheer, and King (2001) provided an excellent discussion of how to develop meaningful service opportunities for engaging teens in their communities, taking into account teens' unique developmental characteristics. According to the Safrit, Scheer and King, "teens are more willing to actively engage in mixed gender groups and seek greater responsibility/decision making in what volunteer projects to conduct" (p. 19) as active partners in community-based programs.

There is an abundance of literature that, both pragmatically and conceptually, addresses the topics of positive teen development and leadership within not-for-profit settings. Myrick and Erney (1979) discussed the concept of youth helping youth as peer facilitators as early as 1979. Lofquist (1989) first brought our attention to the fact that teens should be approached as valuable resources (and not mere recipients of programmatic action) in addressing issues facing them and their communities. Bronfenbrenner (1989) approached adolescent development within the context of the individual teen's larger real-world settings and environments. The Search Institute's (2001) assets-based approach to teen development provides a strength-based approach to developing programs that effectively engage teens, rather than focusing on adolescent problems, deficits, and dysfunctions.

Community-based organizations (including volunteer and service based programs) are excellent learning laboratories for teen citizens to become engaged in volunteerism and service. Chambers and Phelps (1994) argued that community-based organizations have contributed a great deal to the development of youth actively engaged in their communities. Collins and Branham (1999) suggested creating collaborative opportunities, inclusive of youth and adults, as being an essential avenue towards enhancing youth civil engagement, which influences the betterment of the entire

community. The "New Millennium Project" reported that young people believe that utilizing a participatory approach to teaching government courses would encourage youth involvement in the community (Branson, 1999). By participating in a communal process of decision-making, the sense of ownership and empowerment through self-fulfillment increases through the understanding of its outcomes (Gardner, 1995; Kothari, 1996).

The 4-H Teens Reaching Youth through Innovative Teams! (TRY-IT!) Program

One national community-based youth development organization that has excelled at developing leadership in both youth and adult citizens through volunteerism is 4-H Youth Development, the community-based youth development program of the U.S. Cooperative Extension System (Wessel & Wessel, 1982.) Working through land-grant institutions of higher education in each state, 4-H has evolved from its historical agricultural roots into a contemporary community organization focused upon broadening horizons of youth in all reaches of the U.S. The mission of the Department of 4-H Youth Development at North Carolina State University, and the holistic 4-H program in North Carolina (N.C.), is to create helping relationships to enable youths to become responsible, productive citizens. Since its inception in 1902, N.C. 4-H has worked with adult and teen volunteers to teach young people basic life skills, including leadership, citizenship, and community service. In the 2005 programming year alone, 17,638 adult and 6,144 youth 4-H volunteers provided direct or indirect support to 181,145 4-H youth participants.

The N.C. 4-H Youth Development Teens Reaching Youth (TRY) program was developed initially in 1986 (Groff, 1992). The original goals of TRY were: (1) to improve teen self-esteem and life skills, including leadership; (2) to enable teens to realize maximal personal growth and understanding; (3) to empower teens to make a difference in the lives of others (especially younger youth) through teaching opportunities; and (4) to empower teens to contribute to the common good through volunteerism and service. Developed in 2004, TRY-IT! (Teens Reaching Youth through Innovative Teams!) is the new generation of the original TRY program.

TRY-IT! is both a cross-generational and a peer-volunteerism program, preparing teen volunteers to work with adult volunteers as their coaches in becoming effective teachers of other youth and adults. The TRY-IT! program's curricular content includes a total of thirty-one 45 minute interactive web-based modules (available 24/7) addressing teen-adult partnerships, effective teaching-learning, and individual and shared leadership, as well as a section supporting adult volunteers as coaches of TRY-IT! Teams. Teens begin the TRY-IT! program by completing six web-based modules (two focusing upon each of the three areas) that prepare them for a subsequent introductory three-day, face-to-face training retreat. At the retreat, teens utilize the prior web-based module work they have conducted as a foundation for more in-depth teaching and learning including an ultimate teaching practicum.

At the core of the TRY-IT! program are four basic principles for working with teens as volunteers suggested by Safrit (2003) as "Four E's": Empathy, Engagement,

Enrichment, and Empowerment. Adult managers of volunteer programs must constantly challenge themselves to empathize with both the real and perceived challenges a young person faces during her/his adolescent years. Teens experience rapid (and often frightening) physiological, psychological, and societal changes that often result in real and perceived concerns and issues which an individual teen must successfully address and overcome. Empathy is a critical quality for any adult who works with teens as parent, teacher, mentor, adviser, and colleague and partner in a volunteer context. Adults must remind themselves to actively listen to and truly value the ideas and concerns of teen volunteers, even if the ideas do not immediately resonate within traditional adult realisms. Teens seek openness and understanding in a safe, positive environment; it is our responsibility as volunteer managers and leaders to nurture such an environment in our organizations, our programs, and our day-to-day operations.

Teens also seek active, meaningful engagement in their communities. Numerous studies cited earlier have highlighted teens' desires and initiatives to work together with peers and adults as volunteers addressing the serious issues facing us as a society. In return, they both experience intrinsic satisfaction and expect extrinsic rewards that enable them to be successful both today and into the future. Positive engagement is the most fundamental aspect of effectively working with teens as volunteers. Enrichment challenges volunteer program managers and administrators to focus not only on what teens may contribute to volunteer programs and organizations, but also what the programs and organizations can contribute to the teens in return.

Teens have dreams, goals, and plans for the future. Their involvement as volunteers should provide meaningful, enriching experiences that contribute to that future. While altruistic motivations are just as fundamentally important to teens as volunteers as they are adults as volunteers, other motivations focused upon self-esteem and personal development may be even more critical to teens than adults. Teens are at a critical stage in their lives, developing the knowledge and skills base that will serve them in their future roles as adult partner, parent, worker, and citizen. Their participation in volunteer programs and organizations should serve to enrich and expand their knowledge and skills.

Finally, in order to effectively engage teens as volunteers, one must empower them; one must challenge oneself to delegate not only responsibility to teen volunteers, but real power and authority as well. Of course as with any human being, teens will make mistakes and poor decisions along the way. But this is when the aspect of empathy again comes into play, for what individual (teen or adult) has not also made a mistake or rendered poor judgment in volunteer endeavors? Even when a teen fails in her/his volunteer responsibilities, the failure itself offers a valuable teachable moment for teen and adult partners alike. Teen empowerment is a challenging and often frightening concept to many adults. Yet, contemporary research suggests strongly that actively engaging youth in decision-making roles can provide positive outcomes for not only the youth themselves, but also the sponsoring organizations and encompassing communities as well.

Conclusions

To date, 65 county 4-H TRY-IT! Teams comprised of 251 teen 4-H leaders and 89 adult 4-H volunteer coaches have been trained. As of September 1, 2005, these TRY-IT! teams have taught 3,030 hours of curricula to more than 2,609 youth statewide in content areas focused upon critical contemporary needs of North Carolina's youth, including: stress resulting from absent parents who have been called to active military service, informed decision-making, civic engagement, obesity prevention, and aging and intergenerational issues. Initial research findings suggest strongly that participating teen volunteers have strong positive attitudes regarding the structure and program training applications of the web-based modules (Safrit, Edwards, & Flood, in press).

The concept of building partnerships of teens and adult volunteers as peer leaders addressing community issues has strong support in the contemporary community youth development literature. Eccles and Gootman (2002) concluded that, "Community programs for youth offer many opportunities for the integration of families, schools, and the broader community. . . . But youth development depends not only on the independent efforts of programs, but also on these efforts in collaboration with the community as a whole." (p. 136). Lerner (2004) identified three key features of programs that promote positive youth development: "(1) opportunities for youth participation in and leadership of activities that (2) emphasize the development of life skills within the context of a (3) sustained and caring youth-adult relationships." (p. 127). The NC 4-H TRY-IT! program emphasizes each of these three key aspects, while also linking individual youth and adults, and the teams they form, to their larger communities through volunteer leadership.

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