

MAPPING OUR RESOURCES FOR COMMUNITY YOUTH DEVELOPMENT: SURVEY RESULTS ON THE COLLECTIVE CAPACITY OF WISCONSIN 4-H YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

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INTRODUCTION

The mission of Wisconsin 4-H Youth Development is to serve as a catalyst for community youth development. *But what does this really mean?*

A catalyst is an organization that precipitates positive change. That certainly fits 4-H Youth Development. Community youth development, according to current theory and research, is collective action that encourages and empowers young people and adults to create positive community conditions for young people. Again, that fits 4-H Youth Development quite well.

A critical task is to identify our strengths and weaknesses in terms of serving as a catalyst for community youth development and to identify how best to build on our collective strengths as an organization. The Building Capacity for Community Youth Development Planning group has charged with offering leadership on this important task. This survey report is a step towards that goal.

What does it take for an Extension professional to be a catalyst for community youth development? It takes many things. Research and experience tell us that it takes the ability to:

1. Help community coalitions create a common vision.
2. Conduct assessments/evaluations of local youth programs
3. Spark community action involving youth and adult partnerships
4. Teach local leaders about positive youth development in effective ways

In the early winter of 2001, a web-based needs assessment survey was sent to all Wisconsin Extension staff. Ninety-one persons responded. Fifty-four percent of the respondents were affiliated with 4HYD, 26 percent were from family living, and 20 percent were from community resource development.

The following provides highlights of what was learned from the survey. For each section, we first provide data for all Extension respondents. Then, we focus on 4HYD.

CREATING A SHARED VISION WITH COALITIONS

We find that Extension is particularly strong in terms of helping community coalitions and partnerships to create a common vision:

–About 53 percent of all respondents report that they have strong skills in this area or were capable of teaching others about working with coalitions.

--A high percentage of staff (47 percent) have already served as facilitators/coordinators of community coalitions.

-- Approximately 64 percent of respondents have useful tools or materials to share that have been found to be helpful in the field. Available “field-tested” materials focus on key issues such as goal setting, developing action plans, and sustaining group productivity over the long term.

4HYD staff reported a somewhat less strong capacity in this area. Forty-one percent believe that they are strongly capable of teaching others about how to work with coalitions, even though a greater percentage (55 percent) have served as a facilitator or coordinator of a coalition. Fifty five percent have “field tested” tools and materials to share.

ASSESSMENT OF YOUTH PROGRAMMING

Extension’s capacity to conduct program assessments is not as strong as our ability to work with coalitions.

--About 32 percent of Extension professionals have been involved in a formal assessment of youth organizations in their county.

--About 10 percent have developed their own assessment tool for county use.

In this area, 4HYD staff report a slightly stronger level of ability. For example, 37 percent of staff reported that they had been involved in a formal assessment. Seventeen percent had developed their own assessment tool.

YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIPS

Our state-wide capacity to engage youth-adult partnerships is mixed. On the positive side, over half (52 percent) of all Extension professionals have been involved in coalitions or organizations where youth were involved as full partners. Our experience is diverse. Approximately 30 percent of all Extension professionals have partnered with youth on governing boards or other top-leadership boards, while 57 percent have engaged in less-intensive partnerships such as working with youth on planning committees and implementation teams.

The survey also shows that:

-- 29 percent of all respondents report that they have strong skills in this area or were capable of teaching others about youth/adult partnerships.

--38 percent have “field-tested” tools and materials that are useful in helping youth and adults to work together as partners.

4-H Youth Development reports a stronger capacity in this area, with 35 percent of the respondents being able to teach others about youth-adult partnerships. Forty-five percent have “field-tested” tools and materials to share with others.

POLICY EDUCATION

Sustained policy education initiatives on youth development is not currently a priority for many Extension professionals. About 31 percent report that they are currently developing and/or implementing a plan to educate elected or appointed community leaders about community youth development, and the ways that Extension promotes positive youth development.

We do have the capacity to strengthen our efforts.

-- About 33 percent of all respondents report that they have strong skills in this area or were capable of teaching others about positive youth development

-- 30 percent have offered continuing education or training to policy-makers, and 47 have experience in teaching community leaders.

Fully 55 percent of 4HYD professionals report that they have the ability to teach others about positive youth development. Thirty-five percent have offered such training to policy-makers and 53 percent have offered instruction to community leaders.

IMPLICATIONS

In brief, many Extension professionals have strong skills in working in leadership positions with community coalitions and partnering with youth. There are many materials that are available. At the same time, our collective capacity -- in terms of supporting youth-adult partnerships and implementing policy education -- is probably not as strong as desired. It would be fruitful to figure out how to get positive youth development on the agenda of youth-oriented professionals when working with policy-makers.

There are a number of steps that could be productively taken to enhance the ability of Extension, 4-H Youth Development in particular, to be a catalyst for community youth development. Immediate steps include:

-- Arranging for those Extension staff with high skill levels and experience to provide

training and assistance to their colleagues who are less familiar with facilitating coalitions or partnering with youth.

- Assembling and disseminating “field tested” technical assistance materials and tools to those who might want to use them.

- Documenting, analyzing, and disseminating research and best practices in community youth development to enhance the knowledge base of Wisconsin Extension.

It will be equally important for Extension to continue to work across traditional boundaries. Community youth development is not one departmental responsibility, it is a collective effort of Extension in partnership with local leaders and residents. Steps to be taken include:

- State-wide education throughout Extension about the importance and components of community youth development.

- Training and guidance on how community youth development approaches can be integrated into the work of all Extension staff, including 4H Clubs, strategic planning, and community mobilization efforts.

- Education and public information campaigns to policy-makers and community leaders, especially those on Extension committees.

It is important that we utilize all resources within UW-Extension. 4-H Youth Development can be an integral leader in these efforts. Our strength lies in the ability to partner with youth, to conduct assessments and evaluations of youth programming. Many in 4-H have worked with public officials and community leaders on youth issues. The other departments also have unique strengths. As each department brings its strengths to the table, and works collaboratively, it will become possible for Wisconsin Extension to be a strong catalyst for community youth development.