



University of Wisconsin-Extension  
4-H Youth Development Programs

## **"HOW DO YOUTH ADULT PARTNERSHIPS IMPACT 4-H PROGRAMS?"**

**2007 NORTH CENTRAL REGION VOLUNTEER FORUM: EVALUATION OF  
YOUTH ADULT PARTNERSHIPS IN ACTION**

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## **HOW DO YOUTH ADULT PARTNERSHIPS IMPACT 4-H PROGRAMS?**

Wisconsin 4-H has a commitment to the importance of youth adult partnerships and its direct relationship in delivering quality 4-H youth development programs. The 2007 North Central Region Volunteer Forum for youth and adult volunteer leaders provided a vehicle to test how influential youth adult partnerships can be in the design and implementation of educational programs for youth and adult volunteers. We wanted to discover:

- What were the impacts of youth adult partnerships?
- What were the elements to foster youth adult partnerships?
- What were the personal experiences that made a difference in the lives' of the participants on the planning committee?
- Did youth adult partnerships positively impact the Forum?

### **FORUM BACKGROUND**

The overall purpose of the 2007 Wisconsin North Central Regional 4-H Leaders Forum (Forum) was to equip participants with knowledge, resources and teaching skills, which they could share with other youth and adult volunteers and members in their clubs, communities from 14 states. The outcome of the Forum was to strengthen local 4-H clubs and committees at the local and state level. The past attendance has varied from 225 to 550 participants over the past 10 years. Traditionally, the target Forum audience had been adults.

As Wisconsin was scheduled to host the Forum, a conscious decision was made to align the goals of the conference with the Wisconsin State 4-H program priorities. These goals were twofold: developing youth leaders and strengthening youth adult partnership. The decision was made by both the volunteers and staff that if the Forum was to be held, that youth adult partnerships had to be an integral component that was modeled on all levels of the design and implementation.

A Steering Committee and Planning Subcommittee were named. They were comprised of 79 volunteers, 17 (22%) youth and 62 (78%) adults. Youth had meaningful roles as teachers and planners in full partnership with adult volunteer leaders. The planning committee met over a 3 year period in preparation for the Forum. Attendance at the Forum included 509 participants, 107 youth (21%) and 402 adults (79%).

### **EVALUATION DESIGN AND DATA COLLECTION**

The evaluation design team included state specialists, county-based faculty and youth and adult volunteers. Combinations of qualitative and quantitative evaluation methods were used. Data was collected from the youth and adult volunteers that participated in the planning and implementation of the Forum. The UW-Extension Human Subjects Protection Review Board approved the study. Documentation is on file.

An online survey was sent to the 79 youth and adult Forum planning committee members with a response rate of 41 (52%) 10 (24%) youth/young adults and 31 (76%) adults. This response rate mirrors the membership of the steering and planning committees. In addition, two focus group

interviews with committee co-chairs and the steering committee. The purpose of the focus groups was to follow up with information gathered by the survey and gather in-depth examples. The response rate was 17 (55%) participants, 1 (1%) youth and 16 (99%) adults.

## **FRAMING THE SITUATION**

In this study, it is important to acknowledge the uniqueness of the youth and adults that served on the Forum committees. These observable variables provide insight to volunteers who served on the committees and contributed to the implications and conclusions of this study.

What were the variables?

- All were committed to 4-H
- All were committed to providing successful educational programs
- Involved youth and adults who may have not previously worked together or knew each other
- All youth and adults had different experiences and commitments to youth adult partnerships
- All were committed to the education of youth and adult volunteers
- A large geographic area created opportunities and challenges

## **RESULTS**

The evaluation of the impact of youth adult partnerships on committees provided an opportunity to:

- Confirm support what elements are critical when developing youth adult partnerships; and
- Validate how youth adult partnerships can enhance educational programs.

The results will address the following questions:

1. What were the impacts of youth adult partnerships?
2. What were the elements to foster youth adult partnerships?
3. What were the personal experiences that made a difference in the lives' of the participants on the planning committee?
4. Did youth adult partnerships really make a difference in the total impact of the program?

### **1. What Were the Impacts of Youth Adult Partnerships on the Forum?**

The evaluation results of youth and adults on the planning and steering committee indicate the majority (3.90) on a scale of 1 to 4 with 4 being strongly agree, believe that "participation of youth in decision making helped the Forum reach its goals."

- Consensus was strongly expressed through the focus group interviews that youth adult partnerships did positively impact the overall forum. Youth and adults articulated the synergy of "excitement, enthusiasm and energy" that working together created. It not only impacted the quality of the experience and increased attendance.
- Over 33% of the 67 educational sessions offered were co-taught as youth adult partnerships
- A World Café experience focused on building youth adult partnerships. Conversations were facilitated by youth and adults. This successful experience was an innovative new

all Forum event. The results of the Café experience are posted at:  
<http://www.uwex.edu/ces/4h/ncvlf/> .

**Youth Comments:**

"Youth were essential in helping teach about youth adult partnerships. " "Youth brought a particular energy to the forum." "Youth were able to share ideas that adults may overlook or not spend much time on." "Youth are better suited to address the needs of other youth than adults are."

**Adult Comments:**

"I believe it really broadened the scope of understanding and experience volunteer leadership expand helped reduce the concept that volunteers have to be adults."

One adult shared this on what youth brought to the conference: "Generating enthusiasm before and during the conference, providing energy and new ideas throughout, marketing to new and younger audiences."

Analysis was done to compare the beliefs of the survey respondents now to before survey regarding youth adult partnerships. Though the value of youth adult partnerships was strong, results indicated a 21% increase in valuing youth adult partnerships after this experience. Most respondents strongly agreed that youth should be part of every Forum planning committee, 3.88 on a scale of 1 to 4 with 4 being high.

There was an 18% increase in this after the forum. Most significant is the results that showed respondents indicated a 25% increase in their belief that youth adult partnerships are important for every planning team for 4-H. In addition, no one cited a decrease in this belief after the Forum planning process.

Youth are valuable partners in enriching planning, development, implementation and evaluation of conferences where they are equal partners. What they bring to the table can only strengthen and enhance Youth Development work. As adult educators and volunteers, it means examining how we work with youth.

Key strengths cited by both youth and adults of how youth can make significant and visible contributions:

- Planning
- Teaching
- Speaking /Emceeing
- Integrated in the Process Throughout
- Role Modeling

There were several notable findings when the skills of the survey respondents were compared to before and after the Forum conference.

- Survey respondents indicated a 46% change in their ability to teach others about youth adult partnerships and a 44% change in their ability to evaluate youth adult partnerships.
- There was also a 29% increase in the ability to run a meeting or lead discussions that involve youth and adults in decision making roles.
- The only area that showed any decrease was adults' ability to express disagreement with youth; which was only a 3% decrease. It is important to note, even though it is very small, it reinforces that all adults are not comfortable with talking with youth when they do not agree. As educators and volunteers we need to help others build skills in expressing views.

Another notable result is the participation of youth in decision making helped the Forum reach its goals was rated 3.90 on a 4 point scale with 4 being strongly agree.

- Youth response: "Best conference and most beneficial that I have ever been to! I feel by the end of the conference, we viewed each other as equal partners."
- Adult response: "One of the most positive experiences I have ever had in a youth adult partnership. I learned so much from the young people on our team. I was extremely impressed with their input and enthusiasm."

## 2. What Were the Elements to Foster Youth Adult Partnerships?

Practices that facilitated youth adult partnerships through the Forum process:

- **Equal Voice** - 100% (41) of the survey respondents indicated there was time for all members to speak at committee meetings. Youth and adults indicated that it was clear that youth and adults really respected each other. This was rated 3.76 on a scale of 1 to 4 with 4 being strongly agree.
  - Technology had a positive impact. Through the focus group interviews one volunteer cited that "You could not tell if it was an adult or youth on line so I had to treat everyone the same."
  - Many adults articulated through the focus group interviews that youth did influence and in fact change decisions. For example, options for seminars, healthy snacks, and all conference events.
  - "All decisions were impacted by youth...fresh with tradition. At first I did not think they would have a voice (youth); but looking back - they did have a voice!"
- **Equal Participation** - 98% (40) of the respondents believed "young people were involved in all issues, not just those affecting their age group". 85% (33) indicated that "both youth and adults attended the majority of the meetings."
  - Perception was congruent with reality! Both youth and adults viewed themselves as equal partners in the decision-making process. This was rated 3.55 (youth) and 3.56 (adults) on a scale of 1 to 4 with 4 being strongly agree.
  - Multiple focus group participants reiterated, "The leadership structure for committees with one youth and one adult contributed to the success of youth adult partnerships."

- **Equal Role** - 95% (39) of the respondents agreed "young people were included in visible leadership roles." However, there could have been more balance of power between youth and adults. This was rated 3.39 on a scale of 1 to 4 with 4 being strongly agree.
  - The majority of those in focus groups did not see any role differentiation between youth and adults. However youth and adults shared that it took awhile at the beginning, to develop the communication, but it improved as it went on. "In the beginning it was different because we were not used to it that it was okay and that we were equal; it became more comfortable after we got over that." (Youth Comment)
  - As the work went on at the Forum, "There was little consideration if a youth or an adult was doing the work." (Adult Comment)
  
- **Common Goal** - 95% (36) of the survey respondents indicated that both "youth and adults had a say in setting the agenda or goals for the work of the group." There were clear expectations and it was stressed at every meeting the important of youth and adult partnerships.
  - The majority of the focus group participants stated that "the success of the youth adult partnerships came from everyone focusing on a common goal." One adult shared in the on-line survey, "What was so great about this experience is that it showed how 4-H programs can be enhanced when working together. The youth have great ideas, great goal-oriented focus and we as adults need to incorporate that in all that we do." (Adult Comment)
  - "A huge part of the success of the steering committee was that we knew what we all wanted to accomplish. We wanted there to be a youth and adult partnership. There was no one against that ideal!" (Youth Comment)
  
- **Inclusive Environment** - Both youth and adults cited the open atmosphere that was not intimidating as a factor contributing to the success of youth adult partnerships.
  - This was supported verbally by a number of the participants in the focus groups who described the value of the chair or co-chair in creating an environment that all could participate. All were valued and welcome.
  - In addition, the use of conference calls for meetings allowed youth and adults to meet more easily.
  
- **Open Communication** - Youth and adults indicated that people in this group talked honestly with each other. This was rated 3.80 on a scale of 1 to 4 with 4 being strongly agree.
  - Communication and listening were critical elements that were cited in the focus group interviews. Adult comments: "Everyone being willing to listen to all the thoughts of all team members." "We all listened to each other, no one group dominated the conversation."

- **Building Relationships** - 87% (33) indicated there was "informal time for networking with other members." Both youth and adults equally agreed they had developed positive relationships with each other, were honest and learned from each other.
- **Mutual Respect** -Youth and adults indicated that it was clear that youth and adults really respected each other. This was rated 3.76 on a scale of 1 to 4 with 4 being strongly agree. This was also cited by both youth and adults as what contributed to the success of youth adult partnerships on the steering committee.
  - Through the focus group interviews, several adults acknowledged the contributions youth brought with their technical expertise which was invaluable in the delivery of educational programs at the conference specifically the audio visual /publicity committee.
  - Youth comment: "The adults wanted youth input for a successful conference and were always positive. The atmosphere was never intimidating."
- **Deliberate Training and Support** - Youth adult partnerships do not just happen in a vacuum. Training/support and creating equal partnerships are critical in nurturing this process. It is clear that the training on the steering committee was rated higher 3.50 than that of the committees 3.16. This is an element to be conscious of as educators, adult and youth volunteers as you develop these partnerships.
  - Youth comment: "This was the first experience where I have been on a committee where youth were equally valued. No matter what the topic was we were discussing, any opinion from anyone was welcome. This knowledge I have gained through this experience has helped me with other committees, I have been on. When the conference was over, I left with a lifetime of knowledge and experiences." Note: this youth served on the steering committee which met face-to-face.
  - Adult comment: "The two volunteer chairs, as well as the 4-H staff never let the steering committee forget the significance of youth adult partnerships. It was stressed in every meeting since the beginning."

There was limited resistance to youth on committee members. When an adult committee member voices their view about not having youth involved it can make some of the youth apprehensive about speaking up. In this case, the adult volunteer liaisons were helpful in getting the youth perspective. It is critical to have adults who are deliberate in their actions to facilitate positive youth input.

### 3. What Were the Personal Experiences that Made a Difference in the Lives' of the Participants on the Planning Committee?

The focus groups provided a venue to evaluate and learn if and how this experience with youth adult partnerships impacted the respondents personal and work life. Respondents shared how the experience has impacted them personally. Their reflections are listed below:

- "Incorporated it in their personal job as they were teaching in a local school"

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- "Used the concepts in volunteer role working with older youth in county"
- "Has made them more flexible and willing to listen and do what others may want to do"
- "Solidified commitment to youth adult partnerships and working to make those relationships possible"
- "Observed those that came back from the Forum were more involved in the county program."
- "Just do it as a habit"
- "Comfortable supporting youth adult partnerships in the county program where it has not been so evident"
- "Personal level of confidence in youth is growing"
- "Encouraging youth adult partnerships in the county program where it has not been present"
- "Observed clubs are trying some new ways of doing things that they experienced at the Forum"

Extension Staff have made the following observations of youth and adult volunteers who were involved in the Forum. These are unsolicited comments.

- "The Forum provided by first interaction of experiencing and seeing a youth adult partnership in action. It was impressive. It gave me better awareness of how this looks which allowed me to better communicate the vision locally. It has made a difference locally changing who is on our Board, how they communicate and work. It is becoming part of our 4-H committee structure. The youth have learned a lot, but I think the adults have gained more than the youth through sharing their experience and perspectives." (Staff member with less than 5 years of experience.)
- "The Forum has encouraged me to promote youth and adults working together no matter what the topic. It is important to have relationships developed. I have tried to strive for team teaching and partnerships for various things. I have observed that clubs are doing more of this. The combination of youth and adults participating is great, all treated as equals and everyone in it for the common goal." (Staff member with over 25 years of experience.)

### **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS: HOW YOUTH ADULT PARTNERSHIPS REALLY MAKE CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE!**

**These survey results have implications for those who work with volunteers and want to directly impact their programs.** The elements that are cited provide insight on how to positively increase the success of programs through the deliberate involvement of youth and adult volunteers. It also provides insight for professionals about the role of training and support that is needed to provide the greatest return.

1. Youth adult partnerships did make a difference in the success of the Forum.
  - Increased total participation



- Provided personal success for youth and adult planning committee members in implementing the concept of youth adult partnerships through grassroots efforts or from the ground up
- Affected how decisions were made that directly impacted the program in regards to youth adult partnerships
- Provided an opportunity to test program design elements staff had been implementing in developing youth adult partnerships at a county and state level for the past 20 years.
- Documented how youth adult partnerships can positively impact a program
- Increased financial support from funding partner
- Increased financial support for the Forum was actualized from both the Wisconsin 4-H Foundation grant and the Monsanto Corporation grant because of the youth adult partnership focus. Forum participants have used the value of youth adult partnerships in communicating to funders of local programs and have experienced success in securing funds locally.
- Created new partners for future programs on a state and county level

2. The focus group results and on-line survey results reinforce youth adult partnerships positively contribute to youth development and volunteer development programs.

#### **Key Factors That Were Supported:**

1. Leadership structure modeling youth adult partnerships was an important factor that supported the planning committees and the overall conference success. There is an implication future programs need to embrace this strategy for their program planning and leadership.
2. Critical elements identified by study participants made a difference in the success of the youth adult partnerships and ultimately the Forum. These elements included:
  - equal voice;
  - equal participation;
  - equal role;
  - common goal;
  - inclusive environment;
  - open communication;
  - building relationships;
  - mutual respect;
  - deliberate training and support.

When youth and adults are working together, it is critical to the overall program impact that there is deliberate inclusion of these elements in youth and volunteer development. It is necessary to have a specific plan on how to include and foster these elements. It is also imperative to have a forward thinking philosophy of how youth and adult partnerships will positively impact the outcome of the programs developed.

3. Technology was a contributing factor that supported the strengthening of youth adult partnerships and noted by study respondents. This included:
  - Equalizing the perception of skills and contributions. Since phone conference methods were used for committee and steering meetings; there was not a clear distinction of who was a youth or an adult.
  - Providing a Forum where participants had to be accepted as equals because most cases their age was not part of the discussion. This was a clear goal for the Forum and age was not part of it.
  - Opening access both geographically and by ages so that all could participate. It should be noted, youth schedules were stated as a problem by adults but not by youth and Forum advisor and evaluators observed that adult schedules were the most difficult to work around.
  - There is a strong implication that technology should be considered a tool for building youth adult partnerships.
4. Commitment to a common goal and desire for a successful event were variables that the steering and planning committee members had that contributed to the success of the forum.
  - Regardless of the program it is important committee members have a common goal which provides purpose and direction.
5. Identifying variables that may have created barriers such as geography or where committee member lived and various experience levels with youth adult partnerships as the planning began, provided the opportunity to address these variables early on. The solutions that resulted became positive elements toward building effective youth adult partnerships.
6. The implication for programming is that open communication throughout the development of the committees allowed the members to talk about concerns and how to address those concerns.
7. Training and support of volunteers is essential. Youth and adults do not necessarily bring the same skill sets to the table. It is work and a deliberate process. Staff needs to take deliberate steps to insure that trust between youth and adults are created.
  - This includes working with committee chairs to model youth adult partnerships, including youth and adults in the decisions, creating a mutual vision/goal, creating an open environment, providing opportunities where both youth and adults are seen as leaders. For example, have the youth teach or lead activities.
  - Providing opportunities to allow youth and adults to get to know and respect what each brings to the table will help develop the relationship, mutual respect and ultimately affects the impact of the entire program.

## **OTHER CONCLUSIONS AND OBSERVATIONS:**

The focus of youth adult partnerships was carried on throughout the conference besides the planning committee. As a result;

- There was a conscious effort to market to youth to attend and to do so in a youth adult partnership. The overall participation of youth and adults at the conference represented 22% youth.
- Programs were designed with the intent that all ages could attend. This was carried out through the decision of key note speakers, social events, educational sessions and sessions on wheels. This was cited on multiple conference evaluations as strength of the conference. One adult leader shared on the survey "Decision-making with the youth helped us to focus outside the box, seeing the bigger picture of the needs of our youth in today's society."
- Workshop sessions being taught by youth adult partnerships were 33% of the 67 educational sessions taught.
- In the survey, when youth were asked if they made significant contributions, one youth shared. "Youth worked side-by-side with adults in making plans and having ideas." Another youth shared "There were youth in teaching roles, emceeding roles, etc."
- The youth adult partnership evaluation design team and evaluation team mirrored the Forum focus on youth adult partnerships.

## **DID YOUTH ADULT PARTNERSHIPS REALLY MAKE A DIFFERENCE?**

The quote "The whole is greater than the parts." applies to youth adult partnerships. Both youth and adults bring a great deal to any program. However, together the results are exponential. As shared by a respondent: "We did a wonderful job and blew the socks off the standard." (Adult Comment)

In addition, the skill set that youth and adults learn mirrors what we strive to achieve as Youth Development Professionals; thus developing life skills in youth and adults in which they will apply throughout their lives in the communities where they live and work.

The Wisconsin 4-H Youth Development Program has reaped many benefits from the youth and adults that said "YES" to doing the NC Leader Forum in a new way. It has impacted not only individuals; it is changing how counties and state committees do their work. As stated at the beginning, youth and adult partnerships are not new to the Wisconsin 4-H Youth Development Program; however, the scope of a statewide program with this many volunteers had not been undertaken prior to this. It was only natural for Wisconsin 4-H to test what it had been, modeling for years on a larger scale. It is our hope that others will glean from this research report elements they can directly apply to their work with youth and adult volunteers.

The Online and Focus Group Questions can be found at the following websites:

<http://www.uwex.edu/ces/4h/ncrvd/research/instruments.cfm>.