Recruitment and Retention in Youth Programs

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Out-of-school time (OST) programs frequently struggle with recruitment and retention of youth in their programs. Recruitment and retention in OST programs can be thought of as two sides of the same coin: after the initial decision to try out a program, youth need to be continually recruited to keep attending, or to be retained in the program. Youth decide to participate (and to keep on participating) in programs based on a number of interacting intrapersonal, interpersonal, and contextual factors. Several approaches to understanding these factors are discussed, and suggest that youth are "active agents" in their own development; are influenced by their "ecology," or social surroundings; and consciously plan their behavior. Youth attendance in programs is also influenced by a combination of social and peer factors, psychological processes, program structure, and context. Some specific methods and recommendations for increasing the success of recruitment and retention efforts are also provided. These recommendations are based on several youth development assumptions: (a) youth have power and ability to make conscious decisions about their activities and behaviors; (b) youth experience multiple influences on their OST program participation; (c) youth desire the opportunity to engage in "voice and choice;" and (d) authentic representation and participation of youth is crucial to all recruitment and retention efforts.

Keywords: Recruitment, retention, out-of-school time programs, youth.

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Research shows that out-of-school time (OST) programs can be an important context for positive youth development (Bartko & Eccles, 2003; Kahne, Nagaoka, Brown, O'Brien, Quinn, & Thiede, 2001; Mahoney, Larson, & Eccles, 2005). For example, a review of studies on the impacts of youth programs on young people found that participation was linked to positive developmental outcomes, such as increased self-esteem, self-efficacy, and life skills; reduced involvement in risky behaviors; and improved academic outcomes (Scales & Leffert, 1999). Simpkins, Ripke, Huston, & Eccles (2005) found that youth who participated more frequently in OST programs had better developmental outcomes; for example, higher sports participation was associated with higher academic achievement and lower problem behaviors. In another study, Vandell, et al. (2005) suggested that program context (not individual differences in youth) was the reason that high-quality OST programs were linked to positive youth development. For example, programs that provided youth with high levels of engagement and opportunities to develop intrinsic motivation had more impact.

Such positive relationships between program participation and meaningful outcomes suggest that youth should be clamoring to attend programs to gain demonstrated youth development benefits. However, we know that youth are not always attracted to programs, and even when they have participated in a quality program, they sometimes drop out. While adults might argue that young people should attend a program because doing so will help them develop into successful adults, it is more likely that youth attend because they think the programs' activities are fun and/or their friends are there. Of course they may realize the developmental benefits of attendance in time. Recruitment and retention in OST programs can be thought of as two sides of the same coin: after the initial decision to try out a program, youth are continually recruited to keep attending, or to be retained in the program. Yet both goals are part and parcel of programs. Research into the recruitment and retention of youth in OST programs reveals a number of possible factors related to young peoples' decisions to participate or not. The purpose of this paper is to identify some of the factors that can lead to increased participation and decreased dropping out. Some specific suggestions for increasing the success of recruitment and retention efforts are also provided.

A Recruitment and Retention Framework

Several theories offer useful underpinnings for developing successful recruitment and retention strategies. For example, Larson (2006) proposes that youth are *active agents* in their own development. That is, youth development is something actively created and accomplished by youth themselves, rather than imposed upon youth by adults. Youth who are intrinsically motivated to engage in activities are more likely to see themselves as agenic (Hunter & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). On the other hand, youth who experience too much or too little adult supervision may experience disinterest, or be more prone to extrinsic motivation or amotivation (Caldwell & Darling, 1999). Youth who internalize the benefits of participating in OST activities are more likely to maintain engagement. Larson, Eccles, & Gootman (2004) also suggest that a combination of internal motivation and support from parents or other adults can lead to positive development. Thus, it is critical to view youth as capable of making decisions that are beneficial to them as a basis for programming for recruitment and retention.

Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior is also useful for developing recruitment and retention strategies. This theory suggests that people behave in particular ways through a combination of motivation (intention) and ability (behavioral control). Thus, youth who experience both the internal motivation to attend programs and a lack of constraints on their ability to attend are more likely to participate. When youth have control over motivators as well as barriers to their attendance in programs, they retain power in the decision-making process.

Ecological theory also appears to be useful in developing recruitment and retention strategies. From an ecological perspective, youth development occurs through a process of interactions within and between individuals and their environmental contexts (Brofenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Environmental contexts include peer groups, family, social class, racial/ethnic group membership, school, and urban/rural/suburban settings. These contexts take on varying degrees of salience in youth's decision-making processes related to program attendance. For example, participants in one OST program said that perceived barriers preventing some youth from attending included constraints related to gender and ethnicity expectations, as well as personal decisions, peer-influence, and parental restrictions (Perkins, Borden, Villarruel, Carlton-Hug, & Stone, 2006). When designing programs to recruit and retain youth, it is useful to have an understanding of the ecology or contexts, through which youth live their lives, and the influences that such contexts have on youth.

Understanding the influence of gender role socialization also appears to be critical for understanding recruitment and retention. Through socialization processes, gender can become linked to program participation patterns. For example, in a study by Eccles and Barber (1999), girls were found to tend to prefer more social, performance, and school involvement activities, while boys tended to prefer sports. Theokas and Bloch (2006) found that 57% of girls belong to clubs, compared to 48% of boys; and that 61% of boys play sports, compared to 54% of girls. In any given OST program, gender dynamics are in effect and deserve attention as to how they may facilitate or inhibit youth's participation.

Socioeconomic status (SES) can also impact youth's participation patterns. Theokas and Bloch (2006) found that 9% of youth from high-income families did not participate in any OST activities, compared to 34% of youth from low-income families. Youth from economically disadvantaged families who do participate in OST activities are less likely to be enrolled in organized sports, lessons, etc. that require substantial time or money. For example, Simpkins, Ripke, Huston, & Eccles (2005) found that youth from low-income families tend to participate in more religious institutions and local community recreation centers than youth from middle-class families, who participate in more expensive and accessible lessons and sports teams. In a study by Mahoney, Lord, & Carryl (2005) that focused on disadvantaged youth, those who participated in OST programs had higher scores on academic performance and motivation when compared with youth under parent care, combined parent/self-sibling care, and combined other-adult/self-sibling care. These findings suggest a need to consider the economic and familial situations of youth when developing recruitment and retention plans.

Social and peer factors can also play a strong role in youth's decisions to attend or remain in OST programs. Programs can be contexts for fostering close friendships,

since many youth attend to "have fun with friends" (Loder & Hirsch, 2003). There are also positive connections between association with a pro-social peer group, OST program participation, and positive adjustment (Fredricks & Eccles, 2005). On the other hand, peers can exert negative influences (Caldwell & Darling, 1999). Dworkin and Larson (2006) found that 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, disrespecting, and upsetting youth). Given the strong influence of peers on young people's decisions to attend and to keep attending programs, it is important to assess how the culture of a program promotes or inhibits pro-social experiences for youth.

Youth also become attracted to programs when certain psychological factors coalesce to support their involvement. For example, psychological research (e.g. Denrell, 2005) has shown that individuals are more likely to interact with people if they have a positive impression of them. Impressions are initially based on personal observations, voluntary interaction, and expectations about how rewarding future interactions will be. These impressions are further based on group identification, exposure, salience, bias, and social similarity or proximity. Negative experiences decrease the probability of interaction, but if individuals are more frequently exposed to others, that bias tends to decrease. Denrell also suggests that "attraction breeds interaction," and similarity predicts affiliation (provided that access is available). Identity development is another psychological process that can occur in OST programs. Identity is defined as the "goals, values, and beliefs to which an individual is unequivocally committed, and that give a sense of direction, meaning, and purpose to life," (Waterman, 2004). Waterman (2004) suggests that identity is formed through a combination of intrinsic motivation (in the form of "feelings of personal expressiveness"), exploration, and commitment. Activities (such as those found in OST contexts) that are perceived as personally expressive tend to involve connections with others, substantial effort, and feelings of competence (Waterman, 2004). OST programs can provide youth the opportunity to be exposed to a variety of new and different goals, values, and beliefs. Such exposure can lead to better identity choices that become more aligned with youth's intrinsic nature, or "true self." Effective management of such experiences is crucial to youth believing that the program is for them.

Programs will not necessarily be attractive to all youth, nor should they be. Different programs focus on meeting needs for different youth, based on organizational resources, goals, and missions. However, programmers should be sensitive to the diversity of needs and experiences of targeted youth, and consciously link program elements to desired outcomes. For example, among individuals there are differences in the appeal of structured and unstructured activities (Mahoney & Stattin, 2000). Thus, programs should strike a balance between structured activities in which youth can experience feelings of competence in skills, relatedness with others, and autonomy (or free choice; Ryan & Deci, 2000), and unstructured activities in which youth can simply relax and hang-out.

Finally, efforts have been made to identify the characteristics of quality and successful youth programs. Programs that provide supports, and opportunities for positive outcomes for youth are those that are grounded in best practices. While youth may not attend these programs simply because they are organized in a way that is

developmentally appropriate for them, developmental appropriateness is one of several checkpoints for planning recruitment and retention strategies. Eccles and Gootman (2002) identified eight features of developmental settings that are critical to quality OST 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. In addition, Lerner (2002) identified five outcomes ("the five Cs") that all youth programs should strive to achieve in their youth: competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring/compassion. Pittman (2000) has added a sixth C– contribution. To better implement these program elements and better achieve program goals, Walker, Blyth, Marczak, & Borden (2005) suggested that programs can promote and achieve desired developmental outcomes for adolescents by employing the theory of developmental intentionality. This theory promotes: agencies' attention to long-term developmental outcomes in every aspect of the program; active engagement of youth in their own learning and development; and creating engagement through a good fit between the individuals and the learning context. The more that programs contain the identified elements and promote positive developmental processes, the more likely they will provide contexts that are better positioned to recruit and retain youth.

The previous ideas suggest that recruitment and retention strategies need to be clearly articulated in order for the benefits of OST program participation to be fully realized, and to reflect the ongoing cycle of youth's decisions to participate and continue participating. Thus, the rest of this paper will discuss a number of methods for recruiting and retaining program participants. These recommendations are based on several principles: (a) youth have power and ability to make conscious decisions about their activities and behaviors; (b) youth experience multiple influences on their OST program participation; (c) youth desire the opportunity to engage in "voice and choice;" and (d) authentic representation and participation of youth is crucial to all recruitment and retention efforts. The following recommendations are grounded in the youth development approaches discussed previously in this paper, and are intended to provide a variety of factors to consider when integrating a recruitment and retention plan into a program.

Recruitment and Retention Methodological Considerations

Method 1: Youth Voice. When youth are authentically represented and feel ownership of programs, they are more likely to be attracted to and stay in programs.

Recommendations:

- Create teen leadership councils and spaces on the agency's board of directors for participants, and ensure that these are not "token" positions;
- Support youth in understanding their roles and responsibilities in the organization, and support youth's understanding of issues inherent in organizational management, such as balancing the mission of the organization with available resources; and
- Design and implement a leadership development program, where youth progress from one level of leadership responsibility to the next; encourage older youth to mentor younger ones ("cascading leadership").

Method 2: Intentional Programming. Programs should be designed and implemented with youth input, and reflect the needs and aspirations of the participants.

Recommendations:

- Ensure that youth have input about program content, scheduling, and program operations through surveys, informal questioning, focus groups, and leadership groups/boards; gather input from non-participants too;
- Regularly update program offerings based on trends, youth input, and salient community issues; however, also balance change with the need for predictable consistency;
- Where appropriate, offer diverse activities for youth with different interests and backgrounds (age, gender, interests, etc);
- Create a plan that utilizes supportive community resources (e.g., other youth serving organizations) to jointly offer a greater diversity of activities and opportunities;
- Ensure that youth have opportunities to develop and engage in a variety of relationships with a variety of peers and adults; and
- Develop a plan for those who will 'age out' of a program by providing graduation ceremonies/parties and opportunities to take on other roles or responsibilities at a program site (e.g., junior staff positions).

Method 3: Safety. In order to recruit and retain youth, they need to feel emotionally and physically safe. A safe place is one that does not tolerate, accept, or support violence and aggression. Protecting individuals from bullying due to sexual orientation, ability, gender, or ethnicity is also critical.

Recommendations:

- Train staff to conduct physical and emotional risk assessments with youth: Discuss the safety issues involved with the program and what steps can be taken to address them;
- Develop acceptable parameters of behavior and engage youth in developing agreements on how participants and staff should behave and the consequences for inappropriate behavior;
- Consider increasing or decreasing police presence depending on the relationship between youth and police; train security staff and local police on how to interact with program youth;
- Provide chaperones to escort youth home after activities;
- Create opportunities for youth to discuss violence in the community through trained adult staff facilitation; create an internal environment and culture of respect through developing peaceful solutions to conflicts; and
- Train staff to role model safe actions and words.

Method 4: Community Service. Meaningful service opportunities can improve youth's connections to their communities, job skills, self-esteem, and commitment to the organization.

Recommendations:

- Support youth in understanding that they *do* have something to offer others;
- Develop a work plan with youth that includes desired outcomes, action steps, resources, indicators, and obstacles/challenges to serving the needs of others; and
- Provide opportunities for within-facility service projects (e.g. regularly occurring events such as holiday celebrations) as an entrée to providing community-based projects.

Method 5: Attendance Incentives. While participation in programs may be intrinsically rewarding for some youth, other youth (especially those new to the program) may benefit from initially offering extrinsic rewards for participation. However, in some cases incentives can be decreased if youth switch from external to internal motivations to attend.

Recommendations:

- Conduct field trips and special events as incentives and rewards for program attendance;
- Create a culture of high attendance; consider providing various attendance awards, recognitions, pins, badges, t-shirts, etc., that are consistent with the background and culture of the individuals being served;
- Appoint or elect experienced youth to leadership roles in the program; and
- Create a systematic program of contacting dropouts to determine their reasons for leaving the program as a basis for program adjustment and enhancement.

Method 6: 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 created by others concerning the quality of program activities and staff. The buzz may create both positive and negative impressions of a program.

Recommendations:

- Involve youth in every aspect of an advertising campaign, from conceptualization to program evaluation;
- Send current participants to recruit youth at other places that youth frequent;
- Use youth culture language, colors, themes, and activities in advertising; use eye-catching youth-designed media that is culturally sensitive to local youth;
- Collaborate with other youth-serving agencies to promote your program and to promote their programs;
- Use first contact techniques, such as assigning a "veteran participant" to buddy with a new participant;
- Truly listen to and address new youth's concerns about their potential participation and specific constraints, etc.; and
- Attempt to counter negative program buzz with factual information and attention-grabbing programs and events.

Method 7: Family Involvement. If family members believe in and support youth participation in a program, youth are more likely to attend. Family members can serve as resources and volunteers for the program.
Recommendations:

- Recruit youth by advertising to adult family members; advertising may be formal (flyers and newsletters) and informal (outreach to adults in the community, including home visits);
- Conduct "family nights" with joint activities for youth and family members; invite family participation in ceremonies or special events; distribute program newsletters to families; and
- Involve family members of participants on program boards of directors or advisory committees.

Method 8: 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 youth. Youth will stay in a program because caring staff (and friends) are there.
Recommendations:

- Carefully select and train staff; include youth in this process; ensure that staff have a positive attitude toward youth and see them as assets, not liabilities (or problems to be fixed or controlled); staff should demonstrate flexibility, listening skills, and judgment in deciding when to provide leadership and when to step back to empower youth to lead;
- Staff should be hired with the intent that they will work for at least two years to enable meaningful development of relationships; this intention can be reflected in the staff agreement/contract and during staff training;
- Hire staff who reflect the diversity of participants (gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc);
- Staff should be supported through autonomy in their work, ongoing training opportunities, and compensation that is reflective of the responsibility they have;
- Support youth in cultivating self-efficacy—if young people can do the task, let them; and
- Train staff to be resources for dealing with issues, obstacles, and crises that arise for youth; train staff to understand current and salient youth issues (i.e. body image, bullying, violence, etc.) and best program practices; use staff meetings to ensure that values are communicated and shared.

Method 9: Youth-Friendly Facilities. A comfortable setting helps youth feel at ease being at the site. Youth can become attached to the positive environment found at the OST program site.
Recommendations:

- Involve youth in designing, rehabilitating, or redecorating youth program facilities; work with youth to determine designs and color schemes that are

current and popular among youth;

- Use resilient and adaptable furnishings and equipment; use partitions and differing sizes of rooms for different activities; ensure that space is conducive to socializing as well as studying, computer use (with screened internet access), and other activities; and
- Separate older from younger youth (via facility entry points, different activities) through time scheduling or spatial configurations so that they feel comfortable being with others their own age.

Method 10: Collaborations and Partnerships. Collaborating with other youth-serving organizations is a cost-effective way to fill the programming gaps and to recruit new participants.
Recommendations:

- Provide field trips to introduce participants in one program to opportunities in other programs;
- Work with local businesses to provide youth with jobs and internships;
- Share evaluation methods and outcomes between organizations; and
- Have youth conduct workshops and trainings in other organizations.

Method 11: Access and Transportation. Easy and safe travel to and from programs can result in increased attendance.
Recommendations:

- Engage local and school bus companies in transporting youth to and from programs; where possible, create price breaks for public transportation; and provide transportation through agency-owned vehicles;
- Locate programs in the target community so that participants can safely walk to programs (consider using adult chaperones), or collaborate with existing facilities, such as churches or community arts centers, to implement your program;
- Ensure that the hours of operation are consistent with youth's availability and preferred times for participation (open after school, evenings, and weekends); and
- Work with insurance companies to clarify program activities, and solicit their input into risk management.

Method 12: Evaluation. Evaluating 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 life skills.
Recommendations:

- Evaluate attendance patterns (frequency, total numbers, demographic data, and other information of importance to the organization);

- Identify key aspects of the program that influence positive youth development;
- Examine trends in the community as well as among the participants, such as shifting demographics, economic changes, youth culture preferences, etc.;
- Calculate the cost per participant to inform funding efforts; and
- Conduct regular assessments to determine program satisfaction and suggestions for program improvement.

Closing Thoughts

Too little attention is paid to recruitment and retention practices in many organizations. Often the stance is taken that "if we offer it, the youth will come." However, youth are not automatically attracted to opportunities. The opportunities must be appropriate, well designed, and carefully implemented. The twelve methods and the sets of recommendations listed above represent a starting point from which to begin to assess an organization's plan for recruitment and retention. These recommendations are offered as suggestions that staff should consider when assessing current organizational effectiveness in attracting and retaining youth in their programs. A well thought-out and integrated recruitment and retention plan is critical to enabling programs to maximize their impact on youth. Important to the success of any plan is understanding that we must actively compete for youth's time and attention, and that retention is ongoing active recruitment.

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