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Celebrating Youth Development

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Promoting Positive Youth Development with Underserved Audiences

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This article highlights opportunities for moving beyond the traditional focus of youth serving organizations to meet the needs of a changing population in an increasingly diverse society.

Introduction

How do we promote positive youth development for all youth? Major demographic shifts provide new challenges to serve these traditionally underserved audiences. The United States is becoming increasingly non-White. According to the U.S Bureau of Statistics (2012), in a decade, the White population will begin declining, while Black and Asian populations will experience rapid growth. By 2060, it is projected that one in three U.S. residents will be Hispanic. Recent population estimates show that half of children younger than one year old last year are Hispanic, Black, Asian American, or in other

non-White groups. They are disproportionately represented in the 22% of children living in poverty, and 45% of children in the U.S. live in low-income families. Underserved populations also include members of immigrant or ethnic groups, rural residents, urban youth, the unemployed, the homeless, and school dropouts.

Starting with Schools. The majority of 4-H programs are conducted in school settings or as school enrichment with White children. Ironically, schools are the setting for failure with underserved populations. Dropping out of school is one of the

most serious and pervasive problems facing students and public education programs nationally (Balfanz, Fox, Bridgeland, & McNaught, 2009). Many are unemployed, including 45% of Black dropouts, 32% of Hispanic dropouts, and 31% of White dropouts. Prevention of dropouts is a prerequisite to productive and contributing citizenship. Evidence-based programs such as 4-H recognize that effective dropout prevention emphasizes both motivation-to-learn and a sense of connection (National Research Council, 2003).

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2012) identified agriculture as the nation's largest employer, generating 20 percent of national employment. Yet many of today's professional jobs in agriculture go unfilled because there is a lack of qualified graduates. A new 4-H approach can encourage underserved youth to pursue Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) degrees and careers. Positive youth development is closely tied to meeting the educational needs of all of today's youth.

Mentoring. Presently, more than 5,000 mentoring programs serve an estimated three million youth in the United States. According to the National Mentoring Partnership (2009), mentoring improves outcomes across behavioral, social, emotional, and educational domains of youth development. The emphasis on mentoring reflects longstanding public concern over the negative outcomes experienced by significant proportions of youth, especially those growing up under conditions of disadvantage. These concerns serve as an impetus for mentoring initiatives funded through the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Departments of Health and Human Services, the Department of Education, and the Corporation for National and Community Service (Wheeler, Keller, & DuBois, 2010).

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention supports the 4-H National Mentoring Program. The goal is to reduce juvenile delinquency, drug abuse, school truancy, and other problems and high-risk behaviors. The three model programs are: 4-H Mentoring: Youth & Families With Promise (4-H YFP) from Utah State University, 4-H Tech Wizards from Oregon State University, and 4-H Living Interactive Family Education (4-H LIFE) from the University

of Missouri. All programs incorporate core principles of positive youth development to improve the well-being of at-risk youth ages 8-17, especially those who are Latino, African American, and children of incarcerated parents.

Identifying Best Practices. In an effort to reach underserved audiences, the 2014 National 4-H Leadership Meeting highlighted steps for developing programs with these populations. These include establishing cooperation and trust, identifying common challenges faced by underserved audiences, identifying best practices in reaching these individuals, identifying technology available to locate populations with special needs, evaluating delivery methods that work best in the 4-H context, exploring new

models and reevaluating club models, and identifying ways to ensure that the underserved have opportunities to thrive in 4-H.

Recruiting a diverse workforce is a major challenge for all youth-serving organizations. As demographics shift, it is necessary to employ individuals that reflect the national population. Similarly, it is essential that the cultural competencies of existing paid staff and volunteers are increased. Further, it is important to recruit volunteers who are indigenous to the diverse populations being served.

New Horizons. Meeting the needs of underserved populations can proceed on many fronts. Recommendations for practice include but are not limited to: 1) Recruit a diverse workforce and equip youth development professionals and paraprofessionals with a cadre of skills to recruit, train, and retain adult volunteers to work with underserved youth. 2) Expand mentoring programs with strong evidence of effectiveness including innovative approaches that may increase both the reach and the impact of educational programs. 3) Implement programs that align the STEM focus at the middle and high school levels. 4) Utilize pre-college programs, formal and non-formal internships, and apprenticeships to increase awareness about 4-H programs and career opportunities in agriculture. 5) Develop and strengthen new and existing federal leadership partnerships in multidisciplinary areas.

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The impact of 4-H could be much richer if more national partnerships were formed with entities such as Administration for Children and Families, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, National Institutes of Health, National Center for Fathering, and National Fatherhood Initiative. The new resources could be an avenue to ensure expansion and sustainability of 4-H programs.

Conclusion: 4-H participation promotes academic success, positive adult-youth partnerships, and social competency. It builds program capacity and promotes sustainability through the recruitment and retention of adult volunteers. Intermediate and long-term goals focus on changes in attitudes and beliefs about prosocial behavior, educational aspirations, and community responsibility. While we do an excellent job establishing partners at the local level, increasing national partnerships is a critical component that can help address the myriad of needs of underserved audiences.

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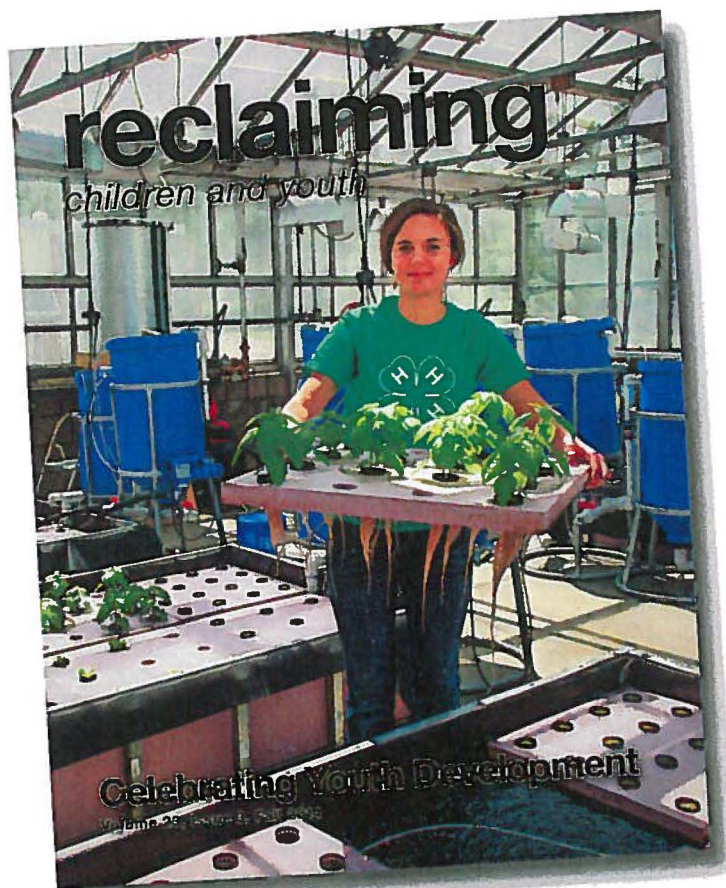


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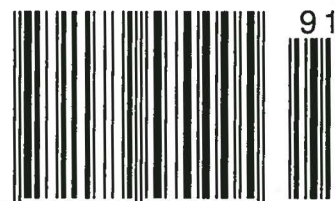


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