

The What, How, and Why of 21st Century Urban Youth Development

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Urban 4-H views race and culture as assets that shape relationships and activities so youth can develop skills to author their futures.

At its founding, 4-H provided educational opportunities for youth disenfranchised from mainstream society, then largely from farm communities. Today 4-H reaches rural, suburban, and urban communities offering out-of-school learning in a wide variety of content areas. The University of Minnesota has a long history of leadership in defining the field of positive youth development,

dating to the pioneering work of Gisela Konopka, (1973). Recognizing that programs look different in an urban context, Minnesota 4-H established the Urban Youth Development Office (Urban 4-H) in 2003 to develop programs and approaches specifically for this population of young people.

What is Urban 4-H Youth Development?

Urban 4-H is a culturally responsive, community-based practice that authentically engages families, youth, and community organizations as drivers of the program. This requires that we continually update our understanding about how race and culture



impact lives. The public definition of the word urban is often a code word for poor people of color, implying that this group does not value education (Patton, 2013; Watson, 2011). This misperception is a barrier to positive youth development which conveys the view of an urban audience as a problem to be fixed. Understanding these erroneous beliefs allows us to proactively address racial and cultural prejudices. We use the term *urban* to refer to contexts where race and culture are visible assets that play a tangible role in the experience of participants and become part of the fabric of programming.

It Is About Youth Thriving, Not Just Surviving

Youth in the Minnesota Urban 4-H program build skills enabling them to overcome economic, educational, and social barriers so they can author their own lives. Our program model recognizes the importance of self-directed learning, innovative leadership, and global citizenship as 21st century skills that help youth shape positive pathways. Examples include the ability to think critically, communicate across cultural boundaries, and lead by utilizing the skills and talents of others (Partnership, 2008). These learning experiences give youth a sense of hope and expectation for their futures and a realization of personal power to positively influence themselves and their world.

How Do We Do Urban 4-H?

With the support of trained adults, youth come to know themselves as life-long learners, leaders, and global citizens prepared to enter a 21st century workforce and find success as responsible, caring individuals. Our program model includes: 1) community-engagement, 2) embedded signature curricula, 3) an adult leader support system, and 4) youth-driven clubs.

Community Engagement

Our community-engaged approach responds to the needs of youth by ensuring that the program validates youth *community* culture, is motivated by youth *community* interests and values, and helps youth connect to *community* learning. Particularly with groups that have historical trauma or institutionalized poverty or racism, relationships are the most important ingredient of quality youth programming. We use the following principles to shepherd our decisions and create culturally responsive programming.

- *Shared vision/mission* with the common goal of intentional, sustainable programming that enhances learning and youth development.

- *Strong relationships* including mutual respect; open, authentic, and transparent two-way communication; and commitment to resolving conflict responsibly.
- *Accountability* defining the roles, responsibilities, and goals of each partner, as well as commitment to a healthy partnership and learning environment.
- *Sustainability* with investment in and commitment to positive youth development. This involves a plan for carrying out and measuring shared goals and objectives.

Embedded Signature Curricula

Staff, volunteers, interns, and partners use specific curriculum materials to infuse concepts of learning, leadership, and global citizenship into their clubs in order to impact critical issues. *Urban Youth Learn* guides youth program leaders to create, strengthen, and advance youth programs using an experiential, culturally responsive, positive youth development approach to building non-formal learning environments. *Urban Youth Lead* is a series of lessons in which youth learn 21st century leadership by connecting their interests to future opportunities and setting educational goals. *WeConnect* is a series of experiential lessons on global citizenship that prepare youth to thrive in diverse settings by helping them understand their reactions to unfamiliar viewpoints and situations.

Leader Support System

To ensure high-quality sustainability and continual innovation, we have built a system of support for our adult (and youth) leaders to carry out the delivery of programs. This system consists of program and strategic planning support of partners by our staff, an intern and volunteer program that carries out the delivery of youth clubs, and a training and support program designed to give a common foundation for partners to innovate their work. Partners are paired with staff members who work with them to start or improve programs. This pairing allows for an even exchange of ideas, opening doors of opportunity through which deeper collaboration can happen.

Youth-Driven Clubs

With the leader support system in place, youth work closely with adults to gain mastery of 21st century skills and drive their participation in clubs. We place a heavy emphasis on the relationship between the youth and adults. As part of our leader support system, adults receive training on

mentorship in addition to positive youth development principles, with the goal of creating as caring and productive a learning environment as possible. In this environment, youth engage in meaningful learning experiences, reflect on their learning, produce tangible educational products, and present their learning to others. This full cycle of experiential learning allows each participant to achieve mastery at an individual level.

The goal of youth as “drivers” is also an important concept within our youth clubs. For all youth, but particularly those who experience a level of daily trauma (homelessness, physical or verbal abuse, hunger, domestic violence, family substance abuse), a feeling of constant lack or loss of control can steer them in a negative direction. Provided a safe environment in which to learn and apply skills, they can learn to control their lives from a sense of purpose that benefits the common good rather than out of a sense of fear or survival that may only satisfy a short-term need. They can also begin to make the program their own by incorporating their cultural and racial identities into the program experience. For instance, in a club at a Native American focused school in Saint Paul, Minnesota, youth applied Ojibwe and Lakota teachings (wisdom, humility, honesty, caring, respect, etc.) to each of the four “H’s” (Head for thinking, Heart for caring, Hands for service, and Health for well-being). They also explored their interest in STEM in the context of their cultural heritage.

Culturally Responsive Staff

In addition to having a strong program model, we ensure that staff are culturally self-aware and possess intercultural skills that allow them to authentically engage with programs and communities. We also provide development opportunities for both new and seasoned staff to continually improve their responsiveness to cultures different from their own. Intercultural skills include: 1) a strong cultural diversity knowledge base, 2) capacity to design culturally appropriate curricula, 3) ability to create a culturally caring community, 4) and the ability to communicate and help others communicate cross-culturally (Gay, 2002).

When asked about their roles in the context of race and culture, two staff members mentioned the importance of helping others navigate differences. A female staff member said, “I am often a bridge-builder between people from distinctly different backgrounds and experiences. This work gives us a chance to encounter new perspectives; I see it as a deeply textured tapestry that we are weaving together.” Another stated, “People trust me to ask the right questions so they better understand and think critically about the way they operate within their own culture and community.” Staff also shared the importance of understanding their own cultural identity: “I am acutely conscious of being a White, U.S.-born woman working in communities of color, so I try to be responsible and aware of my own privilege, limitations, and biases and constantly challenge myself to transform these.”

We provide development opportunities for staff that go beyond a training session. We encourage them to actively collaborate across diverse settings; we continuously engage them in conversations about new approaches to reach diverse communities. In addition, a shared learning cohort model helps staff to understand their privilege, culture, and diversity’s role in their work, to develop the ability to shift between perspectives, and to cultivate an attitude of mutual respect and caring by finding and sharing a link between personal experiences and professional practices.



Why Do We Do Urban 4-H?

One way to keep ourselves and our partners accountable to a culturally responsive, community-based approach is through evaluation that gauges what youth gain from their experience. Urban 4-H youth report that they are appropriately and meaningfully challenged, can think creatively to solve real-life problems, feel welcomed and supported, and are building confidence and empathy. Our evaluation includes a four-component survey on learning environments and an open-ended question about the learning experience. These methods capture the often absent voice of youth.

Program Participants

For the 2012-2013 program year, our Urban 4-H program served 1,423 youth. Twenty-four percent of participants were in grades K-4, 58 percent in grades 5-8, and 18 percent in grades 9-13. Youth reside in Minneapolis (33 percent), Saint Paul (40 percent), and suburban Hennepin and Ramsey counties (27 percent). The participants were diverse on race and ethnicity. Reporting racial categories, 42 percent identified as White, 32 percent as Black/African American, 10 percent as Asian, 7 percent as Native American, and 5 percent identified with more than one race. On ethnicity, 19 percent identified as Hispanic or Latino. We also engaged 359 adult volunteers. Sixty-three percent identified as White, 23 percent as Black/African American, 6 percent as Asian, and 6 percent as Native American. On ethnicity, 4 percent identified as Hispanic/Latino.

Learning environment survey results

Research demonstrates that the most effective learning environments are intentionally youth-centered, knowledge-centered, assessment-centered, and community-centered (McLaughlin, 2000). The following survey results summarize how our youth in the Urban 4-H program felt these elements were incorporated into the learning environment.

- *Youth-centered.* Over 78 percent of youth indicated that their club experience mostly or always included youth-centered elements such as a sense of belonging among youth, feeling that leaders knew them, the opportunity to make friends outside their typical peer group, and having a role in program planning.

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- *Knowledge-centered.* Approximately 88 percent of participants felt that a knowledge-centered approach was in place. Youth felt good about what they had done in their club, they completed a project or presentation, and they understood the goal of their club to teach new knowledge and help them gain new skills.
- *Assessment-centered.* About 78 percent of respondents said that it is mostly or always true that elements of assessment-centered programming were present. Youth reported receiving feedback and recognition for their contributions, feeling their voices were valued, and that progress was important to them and others.
 - *Community-centered.* Finally, 82 percent of survey respondents stated that it is mostly or always true that community-centered approaches were present. These included community awareness, positive relationships, and cultural relevancy.

In addition, four themes emerged from the open-ended question. First, youth stated that challenging approaches to learning and meaningful leadership opportunities helped them develop a passion and realize their potential. A female eleventh grader shared, "I learned how to be a good leader by gaining leadership roles. I am confident and able to voice my ideas outside of my club." Second, their experiences showed that the freedom to play with ideas and think creatively animated their curiosity and helped them develop real-life skills. Third, youth felt that they built a community of support where they felt welcomed and were able to develop respect for the ideas of others by working together. Lastly, youth developed empathy for others and confidence in themselves when they explored their values and understood the impact they can have in the world. A 6th grade participant shared, "I learned to be responsible by helping out one another. I also learned helping others makes you feel proud of yourself and know who you are."

Implications for Practice

Because we find the most crucial element of success to be the relationships among youth and adult participants, program sustainability becomes our top concern. Research suggests several key factors that

determine the longevity of efforts (Hayes, 2002). The first is a clear vision of achievement. Rather than reacting to situations as they occur, a clear understanding of outcomes anchors a project to a firm foundation. The second is partner and community support. On our own, we are less likely to sustain an effort, but true partnerships can fill in gaps of experience, resources, or expertise. The third is a core group of at least three youth committed to the vision and who can attend consistently, becoming the leaven of the program's growth, and ultimately its sustainability. The fourth component of program sustainability is the opportunity for increasing challenge for the youth—something to aspire to next, once they have mastered the content, experience, or skills at hand.

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A clear example of growth opportunity for youth is tiered peer mentoring where older or more experienced youth become leaders by “leveling up” to more responsibility. Tiered peer mentoring increases program sustainability, particularly in clubs with less parent support, because youth see tangible examples of someone they can aspire to be. The leadership position gives them a higher sense of purpose and provides the program a level of credibility and rigor that youth find attractive. The youth leaders (and other youth) become natural promoters and recruiters, and the program always has youth to maintain the learning environment despite high turnover in participation.

Conclusion

In working to meet the needs of the most impoverished youth, we learn to conduct high-quality programming for all young people (Russo, 2014). The emphasis of our practice is to authentically engage communities and organizations in sustainable partnerships, to actively embrace concepts of race and culture, and to remain committed to programming in which the Essential Elements are at the core.

In our Urban 4-H program, youth and adults develop a supportive environment by engaging in meaningful dialogue where they feel heard and carefully consider other voices, and they develop

empathy for others and confidence in themselves when they explore their values and understand the impact they can have in the world. An urban program may differ from other 4-H programs because it intentionally responds to cultural and racial dynamics. By implementing a culturally responsive, community-based approach, we believe that the 4-H program can continue to engage our ever-changing communities to provide positive educational experiences for young people and remain relevant to the diverse contexts in which they learn and develop.

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