Challenges and Opportunities for International Youth Development: Increasing Meaningful Participation in Youth Development Programs

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Introduction: Currently, there is a growing body of literature pertaining to the influence of youth development programs and the positive development of young people. Compared to family and community factors, research has shown that time spent in youth programs is the most consistent predictor of youth thriving, contributing to enhanced self-concept, school performance and aspirations to attend college; improved occupational attainment; improved leadership qualities; increased efforts to maintain good physical health; and greater involvement in political and social activities in youth and adulthood (Eccles & Barber, 1999; McLaughlin, 2001; Perkins & Borden, 2003).

Past cross-cultural studies have revealed cultural differences such as varying perceptions of the importance of group relatedness and personal individuality, the role of the family (e.g., familial expectations), and personal and social expectations for autonomy and responsibility (Gibbons, 2000; Yager & Rotheram-Borus, 2000). Thus, youth from various cultural backgrounds may have very different interpretations and expectations of youth programs. This study examined young peoples’ interpretations of the youth programs available to them.

Methods: The study was large and exploratory, utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methods to examine the reasons why youth from various racial and ethnic groups (i.e., African American, Arab American, Chaldean, and Latina/o) choose to participate in youth programs. The Concept Systems methodology (Trochim, 1989) was employed to collect and rate reasons offered by youth as to why young people participate in youth programs as well as why they felt their peers chose not to participate.

Major Points (Information to be shared): This study examined the similarities and differences in reasons for participation and nonparticipation among various ethnic groups of youth. The information is discussed in terms of its implications to youth program development and implementation for Extension work locally, nationally, and internationally.

Conclusions (Lessons learned): According to these findings, Extension needs to develop programs that are culturally sensitive to meet the unique needs of differing groups whether in the U.S. or internationally. The research clearly demonstrates that youth programs can support and promote the positive development of young people, however they must have the opportunity and the access to these programs.

Educational Importance: This round table discussion will use these findings as a basis for a discussion about the development and implementation of youth programs that are culturally sensitive and responsive to the needs of the intended audience. The discussion will focus on how extension, 4-H especially, as a youth development organizations, can create “intentional learning experiences.” Experiences designed intentionally for learning have three main components (1) opportunities to build positive relationships between youth and adults and among peers; (2) identified competency goals and learning methods; and (3) specific tailoring to meet the individual needs of the participating youth (e.g., cultural sensitivity and developmental appropriateness).