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## PYD and Professional Development of Youth Organizations

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## **PYD and Professional Development of Youth Organizations**

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**Abstract:** This article shares the results of a study conducted in Oregon which investigates the professional and volunteer development needs of (non 4-H) youth-serving organizations related to positive youth development (PYD). This study elicited feedback from 49 youth-serving organizations through a comprehensive survey. Information gathered included organization demographics (reach, size of staff and use of volunteers), current staff and volunteer development opportunities and requirements and interest in offering staff and volunteer training opportunities related to PYD. The results of this study indicate youth-serving organizations not only recognize the importance of a PYD approach, but also seek staff and volunteer development opportunities to strengthen the PYD capacity within their organizations. The results of this study provide direct implications for 4-H professionals. Due to linkages to the Cooperative Extension System and Land Grant Universities, coupled with 4-H's intricate understanding of PYD theory and practice, 4-H professionals have the ability to be the resource and voice for PYD in communities served.

### **Introduction**

Current research in the area of positive youth development (PYD) has proven the need for the existence of strong youth development programs within communities. The entire community, including families, schools, local government, business and youth themselves, has responsibilities in helping to provide for and create an environment where youth have opportunities to thrive.

A positive youth development approach considers the whole young person, not just a single characteristic or problem. Youth development is dependent on family and community development as it occurs in the context of the family, community and society (Eccles, &

Gootman, 2002). As such, professional development, intentionally designed for youth development staff and volunteers working with youth, proves vital in achieving positive youth development outcomes in all youth-serving organizations/programs (Kress, 2005).

A major charge of 4-H professionals is to disseminate research-based information about critical resources, including evidence-based practices, to assist youth workers, volunteers and decision-makers and to further develop and implement effective PYD programs as it relates to the 4-H program. 4-H has a reputation for providing engaging, transformative and effective programming for participating youth (Gerdes, Durden, & Lodi, 2013). A longitudinal study of 7,000 adolescents found that youth who participated in 4-H programming excelled in school and contributed to their communities more so than their non 4-H peers (Lerner, & Lerner, 2013).

Perhaps, it is time for 4-H professionals to look at developing a PYD agenda that goes beyond the constructs of 4-H positions and look to how a greater impact can be achieved on all youth, volunteers, and frontline youth workers regardless of the organization they are connected to. Due to 4-H professionals linkage to Extension and the land-grant university, coupled with our intricate understanding of PYD theory and practice, 4-H professionals have the ability to be the resource and voice for PYD in the communities they serve.

Astroth, Garza and Taylor (2004) assert, "There is agreement that staff characteristics are critical to high-quality youth development, but there is no consensus around what those characteristics are or how a youth worker should best acquire them." This study examines the perceived needs of staff and volunteer development in the area of PYD of youth-serving organizations in Oregon. The intent of this study is to gain a better understanding of the readiness of these organizations to turn to 4-H professionals as a resource on PYD theory and practice.

## **Research Method**

### **Study Participants, Population & Sample**

Study participants were identified through an extensive internet search of youth-serving organizations in Oregon. There were 65 youth-serving organizations identified. The search focused on identifying both statewide and regional organizations but did not include local-level programs if part of a larger organization.

### **Data Collection Method**

The data collection method and survey design was developed based on the Patton's (2008) utilization-focused evaluation. The purpose of this survey was twofold. First, to elicit feedback from youth-serving organizations on their staff and volunteer development content needs related to PYD. Second, to gain a better understanding of youth-serving organization requirements for staff and volunteer development and preferences in ways to meet these needs (duration) related to implementation.

Kress's (2004) eight essential elements for PYD was used to frame the survey questions related to staff and volunteer development content needs related to PYD. The survey design focused largely on collecting quantitative data. A four point Likert-type scale was used to individually gauge the importance of the eight essential elements of PYD within their organization. In addition, the survey was designed for respondents to indicate if their organization already provided staff and/or volunteer development on any of the eight essential elements of PYD.

Last, feedback was collected on organizational demographics, preference of training length and current requirements for staff and/or volunteer development.

SurveyMonkey was selected as the online software program to design the survey, as this software program has a question skip logic feature. This feature allows respondents to be routed through a survey based on their answer choice selections. In addition, the ability to e-mail a link of the survey allowed for easy distribution of the survey to the emails of the 65 youth-serving organizations. The purpose of the survey was conveyed in the email with a request to have the staff member who was responsible for staff and/or volunteer development complete the survey, if there was a person within the organization who had these responsibilities.

### **Analysis Method**

The results of the survey were exported from SurveyMonkey into Microsoft Excel. Statistical analysis was conducted on the Likert-type scale and included a reported mean and standard deviation.

## **Results**

The survey was completed by 49 respondents, with the majority of the respondents (68.8%) indicating they held administrative roles within the organization they serve. Survey respondents represented a broad spectrum of youth-serving organizations in Oregon with the majority (52.3%) of the organizations serving more than 1,500 young people annually. Most of the survey respondents indicated the organization which they represent employs staff and utilizes volunteers. The number of employees and volunteers varied greatly between organizations.

Of the survey respondents, 57.8% reported there is currently a requirement or expectation that staff participate in continued education/professional development opportunities at some level as opposed to only 15.9% of respondents indicating continued education/volunteer development was required or expected for volunteers, yet these organizations expressed strong interest in both staff and volunteer development opportunities (continued education) in the area of PYD. The interest in staff development was slightly higher, as 48.9% indicated their organization would be interested and 46.8% indicated their organization might be interested as opposed to volunteer development needs for which 35.4% of respondents indicated their organization would be interested and 47.9% might be interested.

Survey respondents had the opportunity to provide comments related to their organization's willingness to participate in this type of training which provided great insight from the respondents who provided a "maybe" response. Of the 49 survey respondents, 11 comments were provided with two common themes emerging through survey response analysis. First, respondents (n=5) indicated their interest hinges on a better understanding of PYD. Second, prior to endorsing a staff and/or volunteer development opportunity, some respondents (n=4) indicated approval would be required from a board of directors, administrators or additional staff members.

### **Training Topics**

Survey respondents reported the level of importance each training topic was to their organization in regards to staff and/or volunteer development. Respondents were presented with the option to indicate if a training topic was currently provided by their organization. Please note, for those respondents who indicated a training topic was currently provided, the

level of training importance for that topic was not gauged nor included in the N count presented below.

**Table 1**  
Mean Rating of Training Topics Importance

Training Topics	Provided <sup>1</sup>	N	Min.	Max.	Mean <sup>2</sup>	S.D.
Developing/Maintaining A Positive Relationship with a Caring Adult	5	39	1	4	2.1	1.1
Creating An Inclusive Environment	7	37	1	4	1.7	0.9
Developing A Safe Emotional and Physical Environment	8	35	1	4	1.7	1.0
Providing Opportunity for Mastery	6	38	1	4	2.2	1.0
Engaging in Learning	8	36	1	4	1.8	1.0
Creating Opportunity to see Oneself as an Active Participant in the Future	9	35	1	4	1.7	.9
Practicing Self Determination	8	35	1	4	1.9	.9
Practicing Generosity	4	40	1	4	2.0	1.0

<sup>1</sup>Indicates organizations that provided this training topic currently, not included in N, Mean or S.D.  
<sup>2</sup>Likert scale defined as: 1= Very Important 2= Important 3= Neutral 4= Not Important

### Preferred Length of Staff and Volunteer Development

Survey respondents were prompted to provide their preference on the length of training for staff development and volunteer development. Two-hour trainings were the preferred duration of training for both staff and volunteer development.

**Table 2**  
Respondents Ratings of Preferred Length of Staff and Volunteer Development

Training Type	N	< 2 Hours	2 Hours	4 Hours	8 Hours
Staff Development	26	5 (21.7%)	<b>11</b> <b>(47.8%)</b>	5 (21.7%)	2 (8.7%)
Volunteer Development	37	14 (37.8%)	<b>16</b> <b>(43.2%)</b>	5 (13.5%)	2 (5.4%)

### Discussion, Implications and Conclusions

The push to professionalize the field of PYD is ever present at state, regional and national levels. This is evident in the number of different research articles and professional papers published annually. "Much like the terms used for youth development professionals, the definition of a youth development program varies and researchers and practitioners are still

developing a clear, succinct definition" (Vance, 2012). Without the ability to clearly articulate what constitutes a youth development program, how can practitioners begin to come to consensus around the competencies needed for youth development professionals?

The results of this study indicate that the youth-serving organizations who participated not only recognize the importance of a PYD approach but are also seeking staff and volunteer development opportunities to strengthen the PYD capacity within their organizations. Of concern in our findings, however, is the lack of time, talent or treasure some of these organizations have to provide opportunities to strengthen the PYD approach within their organizations, leading to the conclusion that the knowledge of the need for professional development in PYD is present, but due to lack of resources, their ability to provide what is needed has yet to be achieved.

Study results provide direct implications for 4-H professionals. 4-H, Cooperative Extension, and the Land Grant University System have a longstanding reputation and history of providing engaging, transformative, effective programming for participating youth and volunteers (Gerdes, Durden, & Lodl, 2013). This connection to the Land Grant University system is what amplifies the difference between 4-H youth development programs and all other youth organizations nationwide. Ample research has been published which speaks to the success of the 4-H approach, most notably the longitudinal study conducted by Dr. Lerner, Jacqueline V. Lerner and the team at the Institute for Applied Research in Youth Development at Tufts University. The 4-H program model implores research-based teaching strategies and a knowledge base to both paid and volunteer frontline youth workers to develop a responsive and supportive learning environment for the ultimate benefit of the youth they serve (Gerdes, Durden, & Lodl, 2013).

4-H professionals have endless opportunities to contribute to the PYD field and practice outside of 4-H through being recognized in their communities as a resource on PYD best practices. "An organization's ability to make a difference in a young person's life ultimately depends on the people in that organization. Regardless of the programs and services offered, competent, trusted staff is essential to nurturing positive life outcomes" (Astroth, Garza, & Taylor, 2004). 4-H professionals, through connection to the Land Grant University System, through the multitudes of recognized PYD experts working within or in partnership with the Cooperative Extension System and through decades of research-based knowledge, hold the keys to success of fellow youth development organizations.

Just a snapshot of potential opportunities of how to become the "go to" professionals in the field include presentations at local, regional and state conferences put on by outside organizations, offering of professional development training for staff and volunteers, development of publications and marketing tools, and serving on advisory councils or boards of youth-serving organizations. Through these opportunities and activities, 4-H professionals have the opportunity to become recognized as the PYD experts within their communities, ultimately leading to greater impacts and success of youth within the entire community, not just localized to the 4-H program.

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