COLLEGE OF SOCIAL WORK & EXTENSION

Developing Today's Youth Leaders To Be Tomorrow's College Graduate

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INTRODUCTION

Since 2013, the Learning in Fitness and Education through Sports (LiFEsports) Initiative at the Ohio State University (OSU) has implemented a curriculum-based leadership program for youth ages 14-18. This program emerged because youth who attended the traditional LiFEsports summer camp (ages 9-14) wanted to "give back" and "stay involved" after they had aged out of the traditional camp. Given their interest and the program's desire to support these students' to achieve college graduation or other post-secondary educational opportunities, the LiFEsports Youth Leadership Academy (YLA) was developed.

The YLA was designed to expand upon the social skills taught at the LiFEsports Summer Camp and clinics (i.e., self-control, effort, teamwork, and social responsibility) by providing high school youth with additional educational experiences that will help them gain 21st century skills such as leadership, communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. Key youth development best practices were integrated into the program design of the YLA. Specifically, youth leadership programs that provide leadership skill development activities and model critical thinking, communication, decision-making, problem-solving, team-building, and self-awareness have been shown to be highly protective in relation to learning, career readiness, and youth development (Kress, 2006; Redmond & Dolan, 2016 ; Thomas, Larson, Solberg, & Martin, 2017). Additionally, successful youth leadership programs provide opportunities for youth to apply skills and reflect on their decisions in addition to the cultivation and teach of skills (Hernez-Broome & Hughes, 2004; MacNeill, 2006) and engage youth in community service and youth-led civic initiatives (Wheeler & Edleback, 2006).
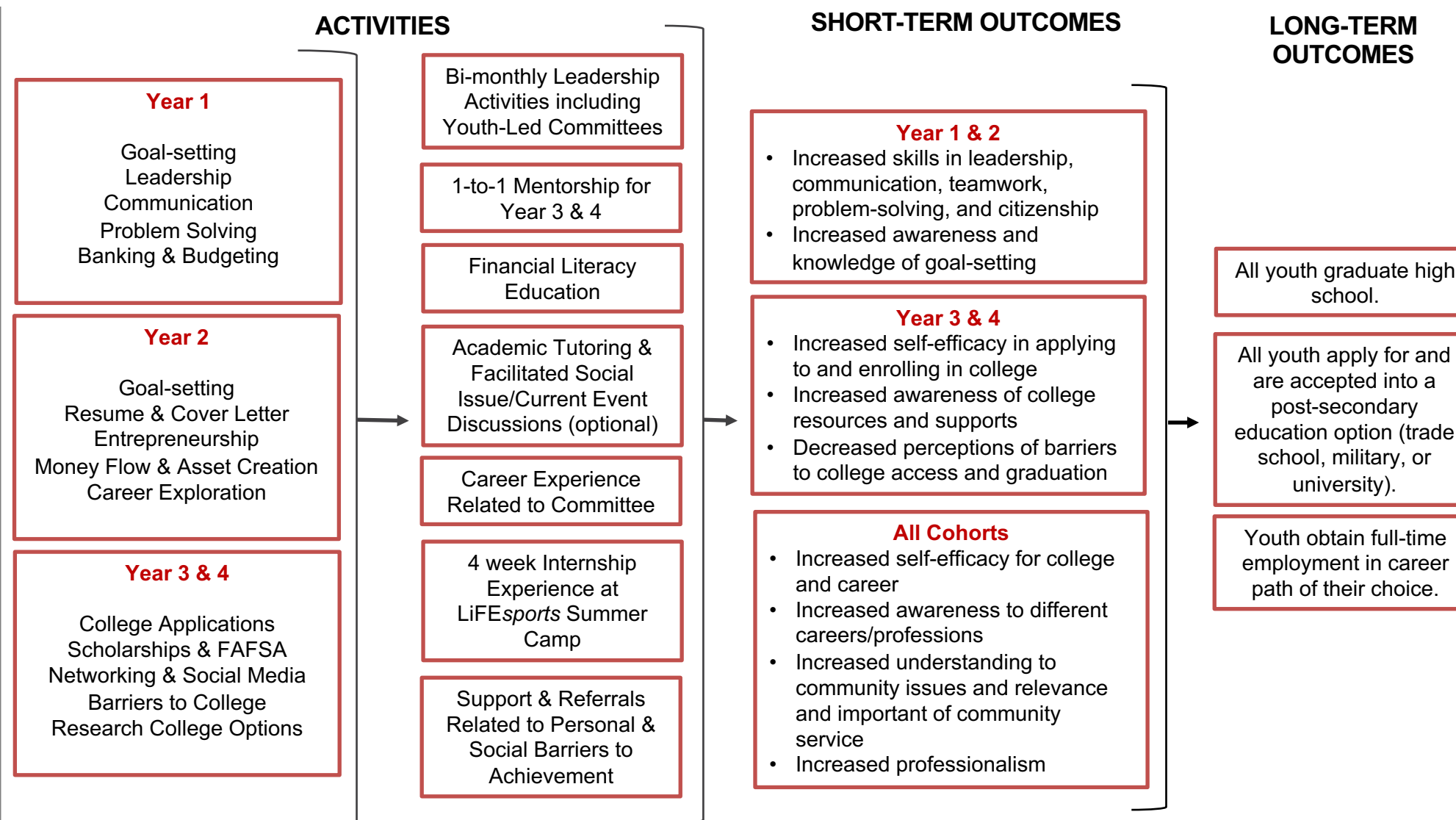
Over the last five years, the YLA included educational opportunities such as guest speakers, college access education, 1-on-1 mentoring, financial literacy and college tours and visits. The program documented growth among youth in communication skills, social skills (such as teamwork and problem solving) and preparation for leadership roles and communication (Bates, et al., in review). Key mechanisms that contributed to these positive outcomes among youth participants included positive relationships with peer and adults, skill building sessions, and an applied internship experience (Bates, et al., in review). While the program documented positive outcomes with youth, staff wanted to continue to learn how to improve the program, as well as increase program outcomes. At the conclusion of the 2017-2018 program, two OSU faculty members worked with program staff to design and implement a series of program evaluation focus groups to illicit feedback from mentors, activity facilitators, and the youth themselves as to the impact of the program, opportunities for program improvements, and program successes. To further explore the value of the YLA, this study used focus groups to better understand the impact of the YLA on youth as well as illicit feedback from stakeholders to strengthen the overall program design.

METHODS

Focus groups were held stakeholder groups, including youth leaders (n=9), program facilitators (n=4), and mentors (n=4). Three 60-minute focus groups were conducted by an external facilitator in 2018. In each group, participants discussed their experiences and perceptions of the YLA including initial impressions, what they liked best, major challenges, and recommendations for program improvements. Detailed notes were recorded. These notes and summaries were compiled and analyzed for general themes.

YOUTH LEADERSHIP ACADEMY LOGIC MODEL

Program Goal: To provide economically disadvantaged high school youth, with leadership development and college and career readiness programming, ensure youth graduate high school and enter post-secondary educational experiences.

ACTIVITIES

Year 1

Goal-setting
Leadership
Communication
Problem Solving
Banking & Budgeting

Year 2

Goal-setting
Resume & Cover Letter
Entrepreneurship
Money Flow & Asset Creation
Career Exploration

Year 3 & 4

College Applications
Scholarships & FAFSA
Networking & Social Media
Barriers to College
Research College Options

Bi-monthly Leadership Activities including Youth-Led Committees

1-to-1 Mentorship for Year 3 & 4

Financial Literacy Education

Academic Tutoring & Facilitated Social Issue/Current Event Discussions (optional)

Career Experience Related to Committee

4 week Internship Experience at LiFEsports Summer Camp

Support & Referrals Related to Personal & Social Barriers to Achievement

SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES

Year 1 & 2
- Increased skills in leadership, communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and citizenship
- Increased awareness and knowledge of goal-setting

Year 3 & 4
- Increased self-efficacy in applying to and enrolling in college
- Increased awareness of college resources and supports
- Decreased perceptions of barriers to college access and graduation

All Cohorts
- Increased self-efficacy for college and career
- Increased awareness to different careers/professions
- Increased understanding to community issues and relevance and important of community service
- Increased professionalism

LONG-TERM OUTCOMES

All youth graduate high school.

All youth apply for and are accepted into a post-secondary education option (trade school, military, or university).

Youth obtain full-time employment in career path of their choice.

2018-19 Youth Leadership Academy

RESULTS

Focus group conversations highlighted how strongly youth leaders, mentors, and staff believe in and support the YLA. The findings about the impact of meaningful relationships and programmatic challenges lead to several recommendations for refining YLA programming and implementation, as well as evaluation considerations.

Engage YLA Stakeholders in Program and Session Planning: The YLA benefits from passion, commitment, and a sense of "ownership" among staff, mentors, and youth leaders. Engaging stakeholders (as possible) in program and session planning might help tailor the college and career readiness sessions, service project, and internship to youth needs and experiences. In addition, engaging youth leaders in the planning process creates additional opportunities for youth to build and express leadership. Youth leaders might be Engaging staff and mentors in planning might also help promote better coordination, communication, and preparation.

Refine Mentor Training: In response to feedback from YLA mentors, this training might be refined or expanded to include additional information about the program structure/format, expectations, and practical strategies for building relationships with youth.

Opportunities for Interaction and Relationship Building: Relationships are at the heart of YLA, and participants called for more opportunities to interact with one another. This might include additional time for mentors and youth leaders to connect during the year, and time for youth leaders and camp staff to get to know one another before camp.

IMPLICATIONS

Based on the findings from the focus groups, the YLA program staff re-envisioned the program logic model (see top center). Key changes included the creation of five youth-led committees, increasing program time to twice per month, and the addition of a program kick-off weekend experience. The five committees created are: Advocacy/Community Service, Communications, Health, Social Planning, and Executive. These committees now meet once a month and are focused on youth-led projects that contribute to the overall program. Additionally, career experiences have been developed to align to the committees. For example the communications committee is responsible for writing excerpts for the LiFEsports stakeholder newsletter and will go 'behind the scenes' at an OSU Women's Basketball game to see the press and journalists at work. In the end, program staff are optimistic that these program changes will increase youth interactions and relationship building, as well as contribute to increased leadership and college success.

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