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The Youth in Service to Elders (YISTE) Program: A Case Study

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RUNNING HEAD: YOUTH SERVING ELDERS

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Abstract

The Youth In Service To Elders (YISTE) Program was developed in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to meet some of the psychosocial needs of the frail elderly and young student volunteers. The objectives were to promote positive interactions between these groups, to improve the psychosocial well-being of the frail elderly, and to improve the student volunteers' feelings about themselves and about aging. This paper describes the YISTE program and its evaluation. The program sequence was recruitment of youth and elders, training of youth participants, supervision of the youth and elder participants, recognition, and evaluation. Two distinctive features of the program were the involvement of a full-time YISTE coordinator and a comprehensive and structured program to train volunteers and their corresponding agencies. During the 1984/85 program year, 300 frail elders and 250 students interacted in a variety of environments and activities. The evaluations for the 1984/85 program year indicated that positive outcomes were obtained for both groups.

The Youth In Service To Elders (YISTE) Program: A Case Study

The literature in the field of intergenerational programming and research indicates ways that youth and frail elders may benefit from each other. Frail older persons lose social power as they become more dependent on their family or community. Adolescents, who have been described as an immense social resource (Butler, 1975), experience their own lack of social power as they attempt to gain independence from their parents (Cherry, Benest, Gates & White, 1985). The needs of both populations could be met by involving youth in the rehabilitation of older persons. It has been shown that social interactions between the two groups often have mutual benefits for both (Arthur, Donnan & Lair, 1973; Newman, Vasudev & Onawola, 1985).

The YISTE model was created in 1982 with a grant from ACTION's Young Volunteers in ACTION, and is part of Generations Together, a program of the University of Pittsburgh's Center for Social and Urban Research. YISTE has three major objectives: to promote positive interactions between the community's youth and elders, to improve the psychological well-being of older persons, and to improve youth's feelings about themselves and about aging. This paper describes the YISTE program and the results of its evaluation component.

Program Description

Facilitating Organization

YISTE was developed in 1982 and integrated as one program of Generations Together at the University of Pittsburgh. Generations Together is part of the Center for Social and Urban Research at the University of Pittsburgh and has a local and national reputation for innovative intergenerational programs.

Generations Together brings together organizations and groups representing youth and elders. For the YISTE program these organizations are public and private high schools and colleges, religious organizations, and job training programs for the youth and personal care boarding homes, senior high rises and centers, and nursing homes for the elders. Prior to the YISTE program these organizations had no formal channels through which to collaborate. In addition to providing a channel, YISTE helps sustain and nurture the interest and involvement of both the older and younger participants. This paper will report on the implementation and outcomes of the YISTE program during 1984-85.

Participants

The YISTE staff included one full-time paid administrator, two part time unpaid student facilitators who monitored the youth participants, and part time, paid secretarial and research support persons. Participating youth and elder agencies contributed about two hours of staff time per week.

The young participants in YISTE were volunteers selected from a diverse population of young persons from schools in the Pittsburgh metropolitan area. The total number of youth involved in YISTE during the 1984-85 program year was 250. The ages of the young participants range from 14 to 22 years, with a mean age of 17 years. The majority (90%) were female. The selection of young

volunteers was based upon three criteria: satisfactory completion of an application, presentation of a good character reference, and a willingness to commit at least three months to the program.

The older participants in YISTE were frail, institutionalized or homebound elders who resided in the Pittsburgh metropolitan area. These older persons represent diverse socio-economic, ethnic and racial backgrounds. The total number of participating elders during this program year was 300. During the 1984-85 program year, 85% of the older participants were female, with ages ranging from 55 to 102 years and a mean of 88 years. The selection of older persons was based upon three criteria: they were sufficiently alert to benefit from ongoing social interaction, interested in interacting with a young person, and identified as frail/homebound by the participating agencies.

Program Implementation

The implementation sequence of the program included recruitment of both youngers and elders, matching the pairs, training, supervision, and evaluation.

Recruitment. The YISTE program began by identifying potential participating organizations that represent young and older persons. In some cases, the youth groups were identified first and then the elder populations were found within the neighborhoods. In other cases, the elders were identified first and the youth groups were found within the neighborhood. When the potential existed for a match between two agencies, one representing youth and one representing the elderly, a memorandum of understanding was signed that defined each agency's roles and responsibilities. The recruitment process for the youth was conducted jointly by YISTE staff and the staff of the agencies from which the youth were drawn, such as, public and private secondary schools,

colleges and universities, youth groups, job training programs and religious organizations. The recruitment process for the elders, similarly, involved collaboration between the YISTE staff and the staff of aging network service organizations, such as personal care boarding homes, senior adult high-rises, and nursing homes. In addition, individually domiciled older persons participated in the program through a process of self, family, or organizational referral.

Training. The second step in the program was the training of youth volunteers. Two, two-hour workshops were conducted by YISTE staff. These workshops were designed to prepare the youth for their involvement with the frail institutionalized or homebound elderly. The workshop content included an overview of normal aging, a description of the frail elderly, communication exercises to enhance the intergenerational interactions, simulation exercises of anticipated experiences with frail elders, and preparation for the first meeting with the elders.

Matching. At the conclusion of the training workshops, the youth were offered an opportunity to select their volunteer assignments from among three options: participating in group projects with older persons, visiting older persons in institutional settings, or visiting an individual older person in his or her domicile. After the youth selected one of these options, a YISTE staff member confirmed the arrangement between the youth and the older persons or the aging network service organization.

Students' and Elders' Activities. The volunteer experiences involved visiting institutionalized or homebound elders for two hours each week. During these visits, the youth engaged in a variety of activities with individuals or

groups of elders. The one-on-one interactions included reading, writing letters, playing cards or board games and going for walks, shopping, or special outings. Group activities included assisting elders in games, sing-alongs, and special projects, such as gardening, ceramics, creative movement exercise and psycho-drama.

Supervision. The youth volunteers were supervised by the YISTE staff through regular telephone contacts and group debriefing meetings. Both of these supervision procedures were designed to help the youth complete their commitments to the program and to effectively solve their problems. As part of their supervisory role, the YISTE staff conducted debriefing meetings every 4 - 6 weeks. These meetings included discussions of problems encountered, alternative activities for the volunteers with their frail elderly friends, and the progress of their intergenerational relationship.

Recognition. Recognition of YISTE volunteers took several forms. One important form of recognition was the annual dinner at which the youth were publicly recognized for their contribution to the community's frail elderly. Additionally, some of the young volunteers have become participants in media interviews or have written about their experiences in the YISTE newsletter which is distributed to all YISTE participants and supporters. At the conclusion of their participation in the program, each YISTE volunteer who fulfilled the requisite service of 24 hours received a certificate commending their involvement in the program.

Evaluation. At the conclusion of each program year, the YISTE staff collected information on the activities engaged in by the participants (young and old) and assessments of the program's impact on both participating groups.

The data were collected using mailed questionnaires for the youth and telephone or in-person interviews with the elders. The interview mode of data collection was used for this elder population because some of the older participants suffer from visual or motor impairments. A detailed description of the evaluation procedure and the results from the 1984-85 evaluation are described below.

Outcomes

The YISTE program has had an annual evaluation component since its first year, 1982. As the program has grown and become more formal the evaluations have also become more formal. The results reported below are from the YISTE program year 1984-85. The evaluations from this year were completed using a standardized form and systematic follow-up procedures.

Subjects. Students who completed 24 hours of service during this year were mailed questionnaires. One hundred and forty-five students were sent questionnaires, sixty-five returned useable surveys, yielding a 45% response rate.

Elders who interacted with students in their own homes or apartments were interviewed in person or over the phone. Forty-one elders involved in one-on-one interaction were involved in these interviews, and thirty interviews were completed for a response rate of 73%. The remaining eleven elders were not contacted after five unsuccessful attempts. Elders who interacted with the students in group settings were not contacted.

Questionnaires. Both the youth and elder questionnaires asked participants to describe the length and frequencies of the visits, the activities shared, and their response to the program. Participants also assessed the impact the program had had on their co-participants. Students

completed their questionnaires anonymously. The nature of the elder interview did not permit them to be anonymous. Elders and students did not have access to each others responses.

Results. Students reported spending an average of 2.5 hours per week volunteering. They visited their elders, on average, for seven months. Ninety four percent of the students enjoyed working with the older person, ninety percent would recommend the YISTE program to other students, and seventy-five percent would like to continue in the program.

Elders reported students spent two hours per week when they visited and that 74% of the students visited weekly. Ninety percent of the elders reported they enjoyed the student visits, eighty-three percent would recommend the program to others, and eighty-seven percent said they would like to participate next year. Ninety percent of the elders also reported that their students had enjoyed their visits.

When students and elders were involved in one-on-one interactions, elders reported that students talked (93%), read (12%), walked (9%), and went out (10%) with them.

Elders and students reported how the program had affected their attitudes about themselves and their lives. As shown in Table 1, 60% of the

Insert Table 1 about here

elders reported positive changes in four areas of their psychosocial well-being. The first area was the elders' social interactions, in which 67% reported being positively affected. The second, the way the elders felt about themselves, 60%

reported positive impacts. In the third, interest in things happening around them, 53% of the elders reported being positively affected. The results also show that in the fourth area, frequency of going out, 47% of the elders reported going out more often than they did before the students started visiting.

Concerning the impacts of the program upon the youth, Table 2 presents the self-reported impacts on the volunteers' feelings about themselves, and their attitudes toward their own aging, toward older persons and toward nursing homes. As shown in Table 2, 88% of the youths reported improved feelings about themselves, 75% reported improved attitudes toward older persons, 54% reported

Insert Table 2 about here

improved attitudes toward their own aging, and 28% said that they experienced improved attitudes toward nursing homes. It should be noted, however, that the latter number (28%) represents the responses of the volunteers who interacted with institutionalized elders as well as those who interacted with non-institutionalized elders. The students who interacted with non-institutionalized elders visited them in private homes and senior adult high-rises, they had no experience in institutionalized settings.

Item 4 on Table 2 (attitudes toward nursing homes) was further broken down by the environment where the elders were visited. The results of this breakdown as displayed in Table 3 show that there were many more changes in attitudes towards nursing homes in those who worked with institutionalized settings. It is important to note that the greater change was in improved

Insert Table 3 about here

attitudes toward nursing homes. In this respect, 45% of the volunteers who worked with institutionalized elders reported improved attitudes toward nursing homes.

Item 3 on Table 2 was broken down similarly. The breakdown displayed in Table 4 showed that more of those who volunteered in non-institutional settings reported improved attitudes toward their own aging than those who volunteered in institutional settings (68% compared with 45%).

Insert Table 4 about here

Discussion of Evaluation. The information reported by participants in the 1984-85 YISTE program year demonstrates the value of this intergenerational model to both the youth and elderly. The important outcomes of the program were its impact on the young volunteers' attitudes to their own aging and to older persons, and the impact on older persons' feelings about themselves. Although this paper describes only the 1984/85 evaluation results, evaluations done in other years (82/83 and 83/84) were equally positive.

Discussion

Several years of experience with YISTE programs and evaluations of these programs indicate that several components of the programs are critical to its success. Informal discussions with elder and youth participants and representatives of the agencies supporting the youth and elders suggest that

two program components have contributed to these successful programs. First was the commitment and continuing support from the Generations Together YISTE staff. Second was the training and follow-up supervision provided to the young volunteers by the YISTE staff.

Generations Together's experience with the YISTE program suggests that the program coordinator for a YISTE program need to be knowledgeable about and experienced with both the youth and elders and have ties with agencies that serve both. The coordinator's role as liaison to the organizations representing the youth and elders and the direct support to the individual participants, results in sustained interest and involvement of both the participating agencies and individuals. It also suggests that training and supervision are critical. They help the youth develop skills as volunteers with the frail elders and provide them with the encouragement needed to overcome problems encountered in their intergenerational relationships.

These components of the YISTE model contributed to the positive impact reported in this paper, and may be the elements necessary for its successful replication in other communities. As the outcomes of this program indicate, in these days of shrinking government funding to social service agencies serving the frail elderly and young people, intergenerational programs can benefit both of these populations by involving youth as a community resource to the frail elderly.

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Table 1

Impacts of the YISTE Program on the Elders

<u>Area of impact</u>	<u>Category of impact^a</u>		
	<u>Positive</u> <u>change</u>	<u>No</u> <u>change</u>	<u>Negative</u> <u>change</u>
Social interaction	20 (66.6%)	10 (33.3%)	0 (0%)
Feelings about themselves	18 (60.0%)	12 (40.0%)	0 (0%)
Interest in things happening around	16 (53.3%)	11 (36.7%)	0 (0%)
Going out more	14 (46.7%)	14 (46.7%)	0 (0%)

^aSome rows do not add up to 30 because some participants did not respond to these items.

Table 2

Effects of the Volunteer Experience on Volunteers' Feelings and Attitudes

<u>Category</u>	<u>Improvement category^a</u>		
	<u>Improved</u>	<u>No change</u>	<u>Made worse</u>
Volunteers' feelings about themselves	56 (88.2%)	9 (13.8%)	0 (0%)
Attitudes to older persons	49 (75.4%)	15 (23.1%)	0 (0%)
Attitudes to volunteers' own aging	35 (53.8%)	20 (30.8%)	7 (10.8%)
Attitudes to nursing homes	18 (27.7%)	31 (47.7%)	8 (12.3%)

^aSome rows do not add up to 65 because some participants did not respond to these items.

Table 3

Reported Attitude Changes Toward Nursing Homes Among Volunteers Visiting
Institutionalized or Non-institutionalized Elders

<u>Type of elder visited</u>	<u>Attitudes toward nursing homes</u>			<u>Total^a</u>
	<u>Improved</u>	<u>Unchanged</u>	<u>Made worse</u>	
Institutionalized elders	14 (45.2%)	10 (32.3%)	7 (22.6%)	31 (100.0%)
Non-institutionalized elders	4 (12.9%)	21 (67.7%)	1 (3.2%)	26 (83.9%) ^b

^aTotals do not add up to 65 (number of volunteers) because some participants did not respond to these items.

^bTotal does not add up to 100.0% because some participants did not respond to these items.

Table 4

Reported Attitude Changes Toward Their Own Aging Among Volunteers Visiting Institutionalized or Non-institutionalized Elders

<u>Type of elder visited</u>	<u>Attitude</u>			<u>Total^a</u>
	<u>Improved</u>	<u>Unchanged</u>	<u>Made worse</u>	
Institutionalized elders	14 (45.2%)	12 (38.7%)	5 (16.1%)	31 (100.0%)
Non-institutionalized elders	21 (67.7%)	8 (25.8%)	2 (6.5%)	31 (100.0%)

^aTotals do not add up to 65 (number of volunteers) because some participants did not respond to these items.