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Jump for the Clouds: An Innovative Strategy Connecting Youth to Communities

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Abstract: Many communities are searching for ways to help youth identify successful career options and strengthen the local economy. Based in a rural community that reflects Maine's decline in jobs in manufacturing and natural resource-based industries, the project described here provided youth with an opportunity to increase their aspirations by interviewing local businesses. DVDs created from these interviews share the entrepreneurial information obtained with other youth. By seeing their peers in the leadership role of interviewers, youth may be encouraged to connect with businesses and services in their communities.

Background

The "brain drain" phenomenon describes rural communities where "many small towns are merely years from extinction, while others limp along in a weakened and disabled state" (Carr & Kefalas, 2009). Although much attention has been given to the hollowing out or losing the most talented young people the achievers who leave their communities for better economic opportunities, the largest group of youth are the working class stayers, struggling in the region's dying agro-industrial economy. Strategies are needed for connecting youth to their community to keep the achievers anchored there, and the stayers actively engaged in the area's economic opportunities. The Center for Rural Entrepreneurship (Schroeder, Heinert, Bauer, Markley, & Dabson, 2011) argues that entrepreneurship may be a foundation to achieve this. In their work they argue that "engaging, equipping and supporting young entrepreneurs are keys to long-term vitality and sustainability of rural communities."

Needs of Community

Maine is a large, sparsely populated state where more than half the population resides in rural communities. The project described here focused on Somerset County, in the western region of the state. Somerset County reflects Maine's continued decline in jobs in manufacturing and natural resource based -industries. Average wages in Maine are relatively low, due in part to the growth in the lower-paying service sector employment and the continual decline in manufacturing. Somerset County's wages are among the lowest in Maine, with a median household income of \$35,333 (compare to Maine \$45,708 and the US \$50,221). (US Census Bureau, 2010)

Over a quarter of the children under 18 (27.1%) live in poverty. Over half of the school children (57.7%) receive subsidized school lunch (Maine Kids Count, 2011). If growing up in poverty with the prospect of low paying employment were not enough challenges, Somerset County has one of the state's highest rates in teenage pregnancy, increasing the risk of dropping out of school (Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008).

Extension has "played an important role in strengthening local economies and enhancing community-based entrepreneurship" in Maine. Previous work with adults has documented the importance of utilizing local businesses as a resource for developing entrepreneurship programs (Bassano & McConnon, 2008).

Goals/Objectives

The goal of the program is to enhance the aspirations of Somerset County's youth by increasing awareness of the opportunities and resources available in their communities. Specific objectives include having youth participants:

- Learn essential components of entrepreneurship,
- Identify personality traits/skills that would be both assets and challenges as an entrepreneur,
- Identify local businesses related to their interests and observe how they market themselves to their targeted audiences,
- Interview and videotape local business owners on how their business was established and criteria for keeping it successful.

Method

All Somerset County 4-H youth between 14 and 19 years of age were invited to participate in the program. Twelve youth participated in the program, representing 44% of the 27 4-Hers in Somerset County between 14-19 years.

4-H participants attended six group meetings to learn about entrepreneurship and how to videotape, edit, and conduct the interviews. Youth, as a group, identified local businesses they were interested in and made the final decision of which ones to interview and videotape.

Youth then conducted 10 semi-structured interviews of the selected community business owners. Specific interview questions addressed:

- Essential components of a strong business in Somerset County,
- How/why they began their business,
- How they identified a market/an opportunity,
- Resources needed to develop/grow their business,
- How business owners personally defined success.

A two-DVD set was created, *Jump for the Clouds: Be An Entrepreneur*, containing a composite of the 10 interview responses to specific questions and each individual interview in its entirety. Youth also designed the case cover and DVD labels.

After every business owner interview conducted, the group met and discussed the specific characteristics, skills, and strategies the owner used to create a successful business. After the videotaping component of the project was completed, youth completed a written evaluation of the program and what they had learned. Responses to one of the questions about the most valuable thing learned about being an entrepreneur included:

- That it's a lot of hard work and you have to be dedicated.
- Probably the time commitment.
- It's not easy. It takes all your time. You have to love it and work your social life around it.

Results/Impact

The use of personal interviews with successful business entrepreneurs was effective in:

- Developing youth knowledge and understanding of what is necessary for entrepreneurial success,
- Increasing youth awareness of community resources by collecting information about existing businesses and selecting those where interviews would be conducted,
- Increasing knowledge of the social and technical skills used by local business owners,
- Connecting youth with positive role models by engaging with business owners committed to the success of their communities.

This strategy is being shared with other Maine counties as a tool to increase youth awareness of their

community's economic opportunities and challenges. The videos have been edited and placed on our state 4-H website and are available to the general public for downloading. Partnering with the University of Maine Extension's distance learning specialist, a webinar is being developed to share this information with other high school/vocational educators and volunteers in other Maine counties as a model for helping their youth identify local business opportunities and resources.

Conclusion

Many communities are searching for ways to help youth identify successful career options and strengthen the local economy. This requires youth exploring the types of businesses and services that the community supports, as well as identifying those not being provided. These encounters with adults committed to the success of their community and willing to share their successes and failures help youth build connections with positive role models. The DVDs make the interview content available to other youth in the community. By seeing their peers in the leadership role of interviewers, other youth may be encouraged to make connections to local businesses and services in their communities.

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