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Informing Practice Through Professional Development: An Interstate Urban Programming Study Tour

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Abstract

Southeast Pennsylvania 4-H Extension educators identified a need for professional development in order to further develop current urban 4-H programs. The expectation was that increased awareness and knowledge would lead to increased skills competency in planning, implementing, and evaluating urban 4-H youth development programs. An interstate professional development program was developed to inform practitioners on positive youth development in urban communities. The 2-day program included on-site observations of urban programs and professional development on best practices. The event was scheduled as a study tour that involved intentional focus on practical applications of research theory for informal education. The Penn State Extension 4-H Urban Study Tour included on-site observations, program development, and networking leading to the successful development of action plans for local implementation. The program was evaluated for impact using pre- and post-tour survey tools. Results suggest that the participants gained value from the professional development study tour, thus similar opportunities may be warranted.

Key words: professional development, urban programming, youth, planning, evaluation

Introduction

Cooperative Extension is a joint program of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the nation's land grant universities (LGU). Extension programs are offered all over the country with support from state and county governments. The mission of Cooperative Extension is to bring research-based knowledge to all communities, including those in urban areas. 4-H is the youth

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development outreach program of Cooperative Extension. In this program youth learn valuable life skills within the content areas of civic engagement, healthy living, and science.

As a national organization with over 100 years of developing leaders, 4-H has a proven track record of providing youth with access to high-quality 4-H youth development programs. By the year 2025, 4-H has a goal to reach 10 million young people with a system where youth, adult practitioners, and volunteers all represent the diverse nature of the country (National 4-H Council, 2017). Currently, youth residing in urban areas are typically underserved, and the 4-H strategic plan challenges 4-H educators to address that disparity (National 4-H Council, 2017). Land grant universities share the mission; thus, a partnership was formed to increase access to 4-H programming among urban audiences. The Penn State Extension 4-H Urban Study Tour described in this article was a collaborative program offered by Penn State Extension and University of Maryland Extension for youth development professionals.

Professional development is an important component for the growth of Cooperative Extension personnel. Known as educators and/or agents, Cooperative Extension personnel engage in professional development as a tool to improve knowledge, skills, and attitudes in a specific area. According to Fields (2011), professional development and training opportunities should be ongoing and are important to ensure high quality 4-H outreach programming. The Penn State Extension 4-H Urban Study Tour was a professional development opportunity that provided intentional and focused time for developing programs for underserved audiences. To advance the goals of the 2025 strategic plan, state and local 4-H programs make benchmark goals to support the long-range vision. While developing local strategic plans, southeast Pennsylvania 4-H educators identified the need for professional development to expand reach within urban audiences.

Diversity in educator staff and volunteers is a component of the 2025 strategic plan; one of the goals of the plan is to attract and maintain a trained staff of youth development professionals that reflect the country's population (National 4-H Council, 2017). The 16 Pennsylvania 4-H educators and one administrator participating in this training were not a diverse group (13 female, 4 male, 1 Black, 1 Hispanic, 15 White). Nine of the counties represented have only one full-time staff member and the other four counties have two full-time staff members. Although diversity among participating youth development professionals was a recognized challenge, the group was committed to learning about serving diverse audiences.

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The location for the tour was Baltimore County, Maryland. (The team of trainers in Baltimore County consisted of two educators: one White male and one Black female.) This site was selected as a study tour site due to its close proximity to southeastern Pennsylvania, making travel affordable. In addition, the population demographics of communities the 4-H program serves are similar in the Baltimore and Philadelphia metropolitan areas. In the Philadelphia-Camden-Wilmington metropolitan area, 34.1% of the population identify their ethnicity as non-White, while 9.4% identify as Hispanic. The community also has 12.4% residents living at or below the poverty level. In the Baltimore-Columbia-Towson metropolitan area, 20.8% of the inhabitants identify as non-White, while 5.8% identify as Hispanic. This community is reported to have 10.1% residents living at or below the poverty level (U.S. Census, 2020).

The tour was a 2-day intensive program that included youth program service site observations, best practice workshops, strategic planning sessions and techniques for networking within the community. The goal of the professional development opportunity was to provide strategies and support for Penn State Extension professionals' local implementation of action plans within urban communities.

Rationale

The Penn State Extension 4-H team in southeast Pennsylvania consisted of 17 professionals (one administrator and 16 educators). When educators' tenure was reviewed, it was revealed that 50% of the 4-H educators working in southeastern Pennsylvania had fewer than 5 years of experience in youth development. After a year of various professional development programs, it was determined that training specifically in urban youth program development was needed at the area and state levels. Ten of the 11 counties in Penn State Extension's administrative area of southeastern Pennsylvania were recently designated as "urban" by college administration. The urban designation is based on population density in the county, which is obtained from current census data. This designation aligned those counties with a number of state-level initiatives to support work with urban audiences. The southeast Pennsylvania 4-H educators participated in intensive 4-H program reviews in the spring of 2018. Those reviews included a comprehensive examination of 4-H program membership reach in terms of demographics and county geography. The goal of the reviews was to drive program improvement and growth strategically, ensuring all of the county's youth population benefits from their 4-H program.

During the county 4-H program review process, a comparison was made between the county population demographics and the county 4-H enrollment statistics. The county comparisons

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showed that many counties within southeastern Pennsylvania were not effectively reaching youth in urban, resource-stressed and/or diverse communities. A common anecdotal response when this deficiency was pointed out was, “I don’t know where to start with urban programming.” It was determined 4-H educators needed support to address this deficiency. To remedy this situation, a task force was convened by the Penn State Extension 4-H program leader, and the Access, Equity and Opportunity 4-H Working Group was formed. The Penn State Extension 4-H Urban Study Tour was developed to meet this identified need as an additional support for professional development. Although the need was identified initially by southeast area 4-H educators, the opportunity was made available to additional Pennsylvania 4-H youth development professionals. This group represented educators who also served in Pennsylvania urban communities and were interested in initiating or further developing 4-H programs for underserved audiences.

Expected Outcomes

The goal of the Penn State Extension 4-H Urban Study Tour was to expose educators to components of successful 4-H youth development programs in a similar metropolitan area and to identify the resources necessary to implement quality urban 4-H youth development programs. The expectation was that increased awareness would lead to increased competency in planning, implementing, and evaluating urban 4-H youth development programs.

The educational objectives and expected outcomes for Penn State educators taking part in the tour were clearly articulated and used to plan the training:

- Become familiar with the components of successful 4-H youth development programs in a neighboring metropolitan area.
- Identify the resources necessary to implement urban 4-H youth development programs.
- Become comfortable planning, implementing, and evaluating urban 4-H youth development programs.
- Develop a 3-year action plan, to begin in the 2020 program year, for the implementation of 4-H youth development programs in their urban area(s) to reach their underserved youth audience.

Approach

A 2-day program was developed that included on-site observations of urban programs and professional development on best practices delivered by University of Maryland Extension

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colleagues. In addition, time was designated for workshops on program development, team building, networking, and collaboration for the development of action plans for local implementation. Structured discussion and planning time was incorporated into the evening program to maximize the benefit of the professional development experience.

On-Site Observations

The on-site 4-H youth development program visits included (a) visiting with a university partner that supported 4-H robotics programming, (b) participating in a 4-H gardening program based at a local high school, and (c) observing a 4-H after-school program at a police athletic league (PAL) center. During the site visits, Penn State Extension educators had the opportunity to observe, participate and ask questions of the collaborators in order to assess program elements for replication. Finally, the program concluded with an opportunity for Penn State Extension educators to visit with several of the Baltimore County, Maryland 4-H Program's community partners to spur ideas for potential local collaborators. The Pennsylvania 4-H educators were encouraged to expand their community partnerships beyond schools to reach out to libraries and universities as well as business, military, and government partners.

Professional Development Workshops

Workshops shared best practices and addressed topics such as developing needs-based programming that is flexible, relevant, and consistent over time. University of Maryland 4-H educators shared their best practices as well as the lessons learned as they expanded programming with urban audiences. Educators engaged in a discussion around curriculum options and adaptations for this youth audience. 4-H educators mapped their circle of acquaintances to identify potential volunteers.

Time was allotted for planning and debriefing each day. Educators were assembled in small groups for discussion on workshop topics in order to relate the information to their own communities. In the evening, time was given for reflection on the study tour objectives and to apply what was learned to create an action plan. Educators were assembled as a working group to draft action plans that enhanced urban programming in their respective counties. The purpose of this session was to allow educators the space to work on their own plans but have the opportunity to collaborate with other educators as well. The resulting action plans were used to support annual performance goals with respect to urban programming.

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The expected outcomes for this professional development study tour were measured using surveys and an analysis of the action plans created by the educators. Surveys were administered at the start and at the conclusion of the tour and were administered via paper for subsequent analysis. The tools asked participants to indicate their level of agreement with statements designed to gauge their knowledge, skills, and attitudes toward urban program development and implementation.

Impact

The Penn State 4-H Urban Study Tour experienced 100% engagement among Penn State Extension educators. The 16 county-level 4-H educators represented 100% of the full-time professional educators in the 13 invited Pennsylvania counties. This professional development tour was evaluated for impact utilizing pre- and post-tour reflective tools. Educators were asked to indicate their level of agreement with statements designed to gauge their attitudes toward serving urban youth.

Data showed gains in attitudes and skills competency in several areas related to urban 4-H program development (Figure 1). Participants post-tour reported an increase in confidence in their skills for cultivating community partners. Participant agreement with the statement, "I can identify/describe ways to make solid community partners/collaborators" rose from 79% pre-tour to 100% post-tour.

According to Northeastern Urban Extension Leaders (NUEL) Urban Initiative Framework (2015), Extension professionals depend heavily on partners to extend the reach and ultimately impact of service in communities. Program delivery effectiveness increases when community organizations form partnerships to extend abilities and resources (LaVergne, 2013). Increased competency can translate into a greater reach for educators within the community. Meeting with Baltimore County 4-H partners gave Pennsylvania educators ideas and resources that they will be able to utilize for urban program support.

An increase in competency in the area of programming capacity was also noted. Agreement with the statement, "I can identify/describe ways to fit urban programming into my total 4-H program" increased from 84% before the tour to 100% after the tour. Another notable evaluation result was a decrease from 63% pre-tour to 50% post-tour of participants agreeing with the negatively phrased statement, "First generation 4-H youth are harder to reach for programming purposes." These indicators reflect the increased self-confidence educators gained

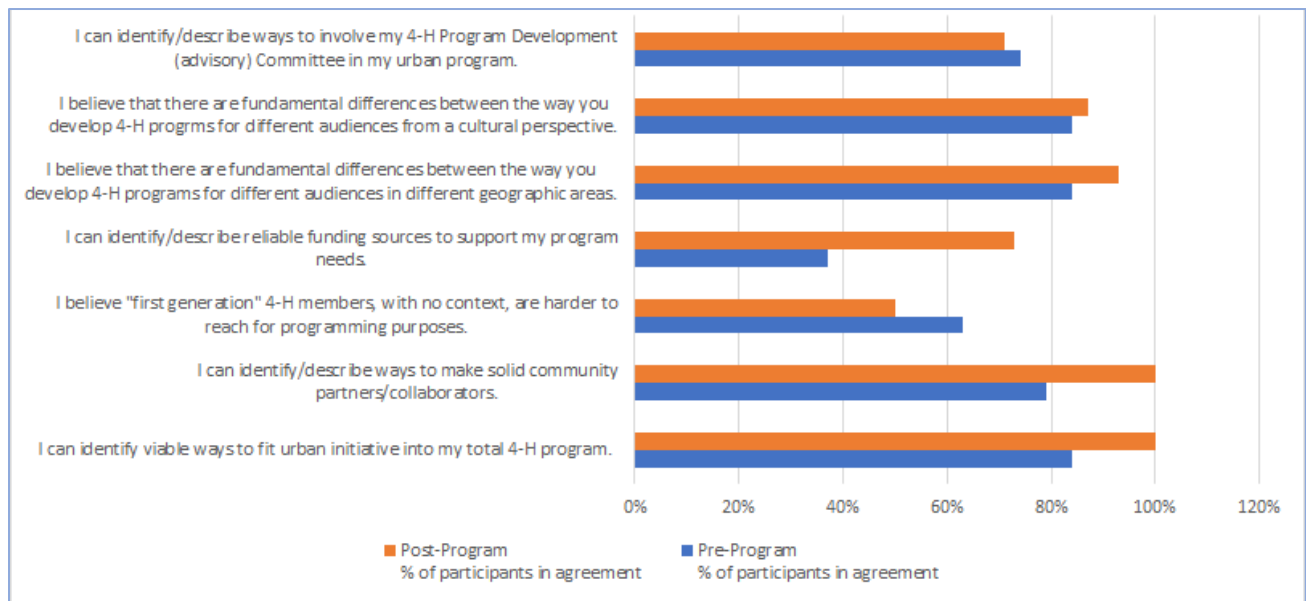
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as a result of the immersive professional development opportunity. Upon further reflection, educators developed more of a “can do” attitude toward urban 4-H program development and reaching new youth audiences. Garcia et al. (2017) points to a positive attitude as a key to success for urban youth program development. Additionally, LaVergne (2013) postulates that positive perceptions will influence actions towards developing a more inclusive 4-H program.

Results suggest that there was also a notable change in attitude towards funding capacity for programming. Pre-tour only 37% of participants agreed with the statement, “I can identify/describe reliable funding sources to support my programming needs.” Post-tour 73% of participants agreed with the statement, nearly double. During the Penn State Extension 4-H Urban Study Tour, funding was discussed and was tied to leveraging partners in the community. Garcia et al. (2017) stated that partners can help with funding programs when conventional sources are depleted. In addition, the same authors suggested that strong community partners can be positive role models to urban youth and provide unique experiences that benefit the 4-H program. Partnership was an area that the University of Maryland educators highlighted as a factor for success in urban programming. Leveraging skills, resources and talents was shown to be a significant factor for progress in Maryland.

Another factor that contributed to progress in Maryland 4-H urban programs is cultural competence. Cultural competence is the ability to understand and interact within other cultural groups effectively (Smith & Soule, 2016). The need for urban Extension professionals to be culturally competent is supported by the NUEL Urban Initiative Framework (NUEL 2015). Respondents reported a small change in attitude towards the belief that there were fundamental differences in programming based on different cultures and geographic location of residency (Figure 1). This data point suggests that the Penn State 4-H educators began the study tour with a moderate level of cultural competence. According to Bovitz et al. (2018), understanding the culture(s) in a community is key to creating sustainable programs. However, further assessments to accurately measure cultural competency may be warranted in order to inform future professional development in this area.

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Figure 1. Analysis of Pre- and Post-Tour Urban 4-H Program Development Indicators

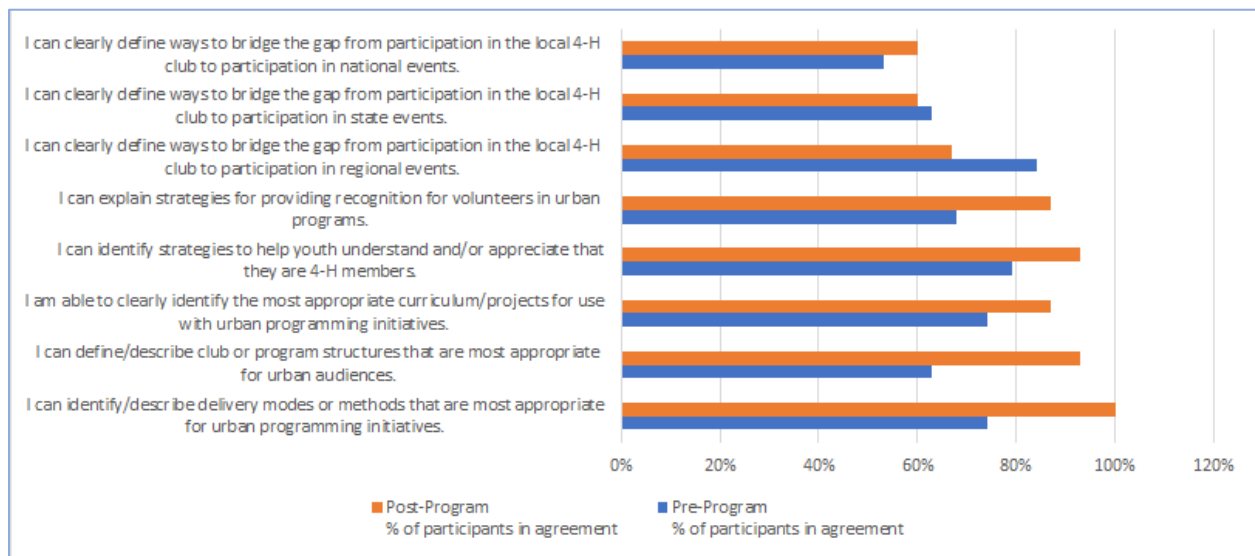
In addition to developing competencies, educators indicated gains in skills related to adapting current 4-H program components for their urban 4-H programs (Figure 2). Adapting and refining extension program components in an urban context was reported to be a key to successful programming with urban audiences (NUEL, 2015). 4-H professionals in Extension demonstrated the most gains in identifying appropriate delivery modes or methods and club or program structures. Post-tour, 100% of participants agreed with the statement, "I can identify/describe delivery modes that are most appropriate for urban programming initiatives," an increase from only 74% of participants pre-tour. Similarly, post-tour, 93% of participants agreed with the statement, "I can define/describe club or program structures that are most appropriate for urban audiences, an increase from only 63% pre-tour. The site visits to Baltimore County partner locations allowed PA educators to experience urban programs in situ. This type of interaction(s) may have contributed to the gains noted in the data.

In addition, post-tour 87% of participants agreed with the statement, "I can explain strategies for providing recognition for volunteers in urban programs." Agreement with that statement was up from only 68% pre-tour. There was also a notable increase in participants' ability to strategize ways for youth to understand that they are 4-H members, part of a larger youth organization, which has typically been viewed as just for farm youth.

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Analysis of the evaluation data revealed that the Penn State Extension 4-H Urban Study Tour professional development failed to demonstrate gains in competency in bridging the gap between local, regional, state, and national 4-H events. The lack of gain in the area of bridging this gap suggests a need for additional professional development on successful practices to engage more urban youth beyond the local level. Some of the challenges that staff are looking for best practices to address include parental support for overnight program participation, transportation to programs outside the local neighborhood, and fundraising to make participation affordable. One of the hallmarks of the 4-H youth development program is providing youth with opportunities to learn and engage with youth outside of their neighborhood. As an organization 4-H is committed to helping youth learn skills that can help them become strong citizens in their community and impact the world around them.

Figure 2. Analysis of Pre- and Post-Tour Program Components in an Urban Context Indicators



All 11 southeastern Pennsylvania county 4-H programs designed and submitted action plans after the tour. The plans were intended to be a blueprint to put lessons learned during professional development into practice. The supervising Area 4-H educator reviewed the plans and informally determined the extent of their implementation during 2020. Pandemic-related restrictions prevented full implementation. Four counties were, however, successful in initiating or expanding programming with urban audiences, with a reach of 766 youth.

Implications and Future Considerations

As noted previously, the impact evaluation data results point to the need for further professional development and assessment in the area of 4-H educators' cultural competence in working with urban youth in culturally diverse communities. It was also noted that 4-H Educators could benefit from further exploration of best practices in bridging the gap between local, regional, state, and national 4-H events. These topics will be considered for future professional development opportunities. The strategic plan 4-H envisions for 2025 (National 4-H, 2017) supports professional development to improve the impact on youth. They support the specific outcomes that (a) all youth, families, and communities have opportunities to be involved in high-quality 4-H programs and (b) 4-H professionals are skilled, knowledgeable, and prepared to work with all members of their community.

Practical applications of study tour objectives are planned for incorporation into the annual performance goals for implementation by educators. Annual goals include a growth focus, which for 2020 centered on identifying a new youth audience to work with, allowing educators to use the ideas they explored during the Penn State Extension 4-H Urban Study Tour. Accomplishment of annual goals is evaluated as part of the Penn State 4-H educator's annual performance review.

A related future application of professional development, post-pandemic, will be implementation of lesson study teams focused on developing 4-H youth development programs in metropolitan areas. Lesson study is the concept of an intentional needs assessment followed by targeted work toward a goal. During the process, educators meet regularly to assess and address the goal using evidence-based learning (Gutierrez, 2016). Periodic team meetings and discussions to extend the professional development experience will also be scheduled to encourage program implementation, networking, and sharing of resources to support the study.

Reflections and Conclusions

This program was the initial step in an ongoing professional development plan around 4-H youth development programming for underrepresented audiences in urban areas. Pre- and post-program evaluation data that demonstrates the Penn State Extension 4-H Urban Study Tour as professional development is encouraging. Replication requires careful identification of the professional development objectives necessary to meet educator needs. The study tour itinerary must be carefully developed to provide opportunities for learning and skill development matching the objectives. This professional development offered educators the opportunity not

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only to observe high quality youth development programs in action but also to hear from successful colleagues about lessons learned and best practices. Taking time to reflect on the learning and develop an action plan is key to putting this professional development into practice upon returning home to the local community.

The collaborative design of the Penn State Extension 4-H Urban Study Tour by Extension colleagues in neighboring states is a model for easy replication by Extension programs. The program was shown to have a positive impact on the perceptions and planning capacity of 4-H educators. Penn State Extension educators continue to work on strategies to connect and effectively serve all members of the community. University of Maryland Extension presenters informally shared that the interaction with professionals from Pennsylvania was helpful as they considered their future projects and collaborations.

Although growth along some objectives were noted by participants, data suggest that more professional development may be needed to address concerns related to volunteer development, advisory board collaboration, and scaling urban youth participation within the larger 4-H program context. Additional attention to the topic of cultural competency may also be warranted. As several of the educators from Penn State Extension are members of the Pennsylvania 4-H Access, Equity and Opportunity Working Group, they plan to use the lessons learned to inform a plan of work to further support the needs identified by the group. Collaborative professional development opportunities such as the Penn State Extension 4-H Urban Study Tour can be a viable method to inform practice as 4-H professionals' work to reach urban youth audiences.

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