



# Producing for the Future: A Collaboration between Low Income Youth, Congregations, and Researchers - Youth Impact Evaluation



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## Introduction

Producing for the Future is an Oregon State University research project where youth, adult partners, and OSU researchers work together to design and plant a community garden and develop a microenterprise venture to market the produce grown. Using the CBPR process, everyone on the project collects and analyzes data evaluating the project, which also provides training and outreach to other communities interested in similar collaborations.

This project is funded by the National Institutes of Health to explore health benefits of community-based garden programs for low-income youth and to teach gardening, cooking, marketing and research skills. The gardens are located at two local churches in Corvallis and Sweet Home, Oregon.

The goal of our research project was to compare the knowledge and attitudes of Producing for the Future participants about local food resources, gardening, eating organically, and maintaining a healthy lifestyle before their participation in the project, with attitudes and knowledge of the topic after they had been a participant. We used this data to analyze what types of changes took place among our participants pre and post experience.



## Methods

The research method used in this project is Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR). This means that the participants collaborate with the research team to make decisions about the project. This includes what measurements will be made and what data to collect for records.

Using interviews to record participant data at the beginning of their project experience, we were able to compare their thoughts and attitudes to participants who had completed the project last fall. Some interview questions that measured pre-experience attitudes include "What did you think you were getting into when you signed up for the project?"; "When you first started the on the project, what were your goals for being a participant?"; and "What was your vision for the project?." Some interview questions that measured post-experience attitudes include "What would you say is the best part of the project?"; "What was the worst part of the project?"; and "What has surprised you about this project?." We used the collected data to document trends as well as contrasts in participant experiences as they evolved over the course of the project.

Aspects of interest:

- Was there an increase or decrease in attitudes about:
  - Gardening
  - Accessing fresh produce
  - Self-esteem
  - Team work
  - Research
- ... at the end of their experience?

## W.O.R.M.S.: Corvallis Garden

Before:

Going into the project, the majority of the Corvallis participants were driven by the research incentive. Program participants can earn a research incentive of up to \$1200 during the summer after fulfilling certain prerequisite measures. This is an appealing aspect of this project for the majority of the youth.

Participants had expectations to learn further gardening techniques and expand their knowledge pertaining to the aspect of gardening. Most of the youth had goals that were personally driven and easily attainable. For example, several of the participants expressed interest in learning healthy eating habits and/or losing weight while participating in the project.

The remainder of the youth mentioned desires to build and obtain new relationships with peers as well as adult mentors and advisors.



"This project (Producing for the Future) has really helped me envision my future goals. I think it's going to help me obtain them."

– Youth Participant

After:

When interviewing participants at the end of their experience, they seemed to have a different perspective on the project as a whole. The participants were able to calibrate the level of learning that had taken place. The youth spoke of developing a sense of "community" with their peers, research coordinators, adult mentors, as well as community members that they interacted with during markets. Not only were participants proud of the work that they had done in the garden, but they were confident in their abilities. Participants spoke of learning helpful eating habits, incorporating new foods into their diet and sharing their experience with their families.

A few of the participants mentioned that the project had encouraged them to eat healthier and because of it they have lost weight. The majority of the youth were surprised by the micro-enterprise aspect of the garden. Not only did they learn to grow their produce from seed, but they were able to harvest, market and sell the produce throughout the summer/fall months. Most participants were surprised at their experience and encouraged in a positive way.



## Down To Earth: Sweet Home Garden

Before:

Before the participants experienced all aspects of the project they had expectations and limited knowledge. Many of the participants came into the project thinking that it was mainly about gardening. They thought the main focus was working in a garden. Some other participants mentioned that the research stipend was an important aspect of joining the project. Furthermore, a main expectation was to earn money for project work. There was also a handful of participants who thought this project would be a fun experience and a chance to work within the community. Lastly, the majority of the participants had a goal or vision for the research project. Although each goal and vision was different, there were trends around contributing personal skills, learning about gardening, helping others, making friends, earning money, becoming healthy, working with the community, and having fun.



"I would think that the best part about the project is meeting new people and having a connection with everybody while you're doing work and growing all these vegetables for people in need. It's not just about the money, it's about helping people out too." – Youth Participant

After:

After becoming involved in the project the participants realized that there they were learning a lot. The majority of the participants said they gained knowledge about gardening. A few were happily surprised about the variety of produce they grew in the garden and how fast the garden grew. Many other participants said that they are learning about nutrition, food, and staying healthy. Several participants did not realize that there was a large nutrition component to the project. They enjoyed learning about healthy recipes and nutrition facts that they could take home with their produce. The research component was also surprising in some way. Many participants knew this was a research-based project. However, they also did not realize how many types of research could be implemented in this project. The variety of research methods seemed to appeal to the participants as well. Moreover, some participants did not realize that there was a micro-enterprise component of the project. They said they like the chance to market their produce and recruit community members. Also, participants thought that they were building connections. This project offers interactions with researchers, congregation members, other youth, and community members. Lastly, there were a handful of participants who said they obtained a better work ethic and sense of responsibility. Many participants said they were surprised the contribution level and how hard everyone was working. Overall, the project dynamic came together and the participants were gaining new knowledge in gardening, nutrition, micro-enterprising, and community building.



## Conclusions

The Sweet Home and Corvallis garden participants showed more enthusiasm in gardening, access to fresh produce, self-esteem, teamwork, and research as they spent more time in the project. Participants discussed how they were learning more about gardening and nutrition. They were also surprised about how well the participants worked together. The participants also learned about how many types of research were implemented into this project. They seemed to enjoy the variety of research available to them because it allowed for creativity. Lastly, self-esteem seemed to increase because participants talked about eating healthy and feeling healthy. The nutrition lessons and hard garden work seems to make the participants feel healthy and active. The only negative aspects of the project included random garden tasks, morning hours, paperwork, waiting to get paid, and waiting for project funding. These are some negative trends but many of the participants had a positive spin on their answer. Overall, for the majority of participants there seems to be an increase of positive knowledge and feelings as experience in the project increased.



"I look forward to coming to the garden and learning something new, it's one of the best parts of my week." – Youth participant



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