

LESSONS ABOUT YOUTH ENGAGEMENT AND RETENTION

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Ohio 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC) are charged with providing interventions and supports in the non-school hours designed to improve academic and social competencies among youth who are underperforming and/or are economically disadvantaged. 21st CCLC address these challenges through partnerships among schools, community organizations, families, health and mental health providers, and higher education. Through the OSU College of Social Work's 21st CCLC training, technical assistance, and dissemination efforts, key professional development efforts for 21st CCLC grantees have focused on the implementation of research-based best practices designed to promote youth engagement and retention. These strategies ensure that the "right" youth are targeted for 21st CCLC programming. They also must ensure that identified youth regularly participate in programs at levels designed to promote academic achievement and healthy development. This is difficult, however, as there are challenges in serving these hard-to-reach populations because the factors that put these youth at risk also make it difficult to engage and retain them in the needed programs. 21st CCLC need to recruit the youth who are in most need of academic support and intervention. In addition, positive benefits depend on sufficient participation. Youth that don't attend often or long enough don't get the positive benefits. 21st CCLC must also implement ongoing retention strategies designed to foster continued involvement and engagement over time.

What Does the Research Tell Us About Engaging Youth?

Some key questions are: What attracts youth to programs and what keeps them coming to programs? Of equal interest is the question, why are some programs filled to capacity every day, while others struggle to meet the minimal attendance standards? Research tells us that there are 5 key factors for engaging and retaining youth: Interest and relevance, Opportunities, Relatedness, Competence and Mastery, and Autonomy.

Interests & Relevance

There are several primary reasons youth initially come to 21st CCLC and other related programs. Most of these connect with student interests. Some leading reasons youth initially chose to attend include: interest, enjoyment, skill development, and friends. It's important that program activities excite and interest youth. Youth need opportunities to learn & apply skills in a broad array of arenas, from sports to conversation, and from the arts to job preparation. Activity choices should be available that are meaningful and relevant to youth. Interest surveys can help program staff offer new activities while continuing to offer activities that have been successful with youth.

Opportunities

A key concept in providing programming is opportunity. There must be programs available that meet the varied interests of youth, provide them with real life skills, and afford them chances to experience new things. Because youth have widely varying interests that frequently change over time and with experience, it is important to have several positive choices available for youth in communities. It is important to ensure that youth are aware of those program options, and that barriers such as cost or transportation are addressed. Also

remember that the opportunities that attract youth to those programs may not be reasons they continue to attend.

Relatedness

Research also indicates that relationships are primary reasons youth attend programs. Youth need to feel welcome, experience a sense of belonging, and need to make positive connections to caring adults and to other youth. Youth who find friendships, strong social networks, emotional support, and caring adults are more likely to stay involved in a program. Youth also need to find role models similar to themselves and have opportunities to interact with people of varying races, cultures, ages, and abilities. An environment where adults model and express acceptance and appreciation for racial, cultural, financial, and ability differences can be an emotionally safe haven for youth. Strategies that foster relatedness and connections to adults, peers, the 21st CCLC, the school, and the community foster long-term engagement.

Competence and Mastery

Activities must be planned to not only to address social, academic, and/or behavioral needs, but also must challenge youth and provide opportunities to build skills and experience success and mastery. Improvement,

progress, and mastery are important goals within quality programs. Adults can help youth recognize the relationship between the time, effort, practice, and success through honest, gentle, sincere, and specific feedback. This allows youth to feel competent and believe that they can be successful

Autonomy

Part of growing up involves learning to take control of oneself and one's environment. Youth need some control over how a program is structured and what activities are offered. Youth not only want independence, but they need opportunities to practice planning, make decisions, and serve in leadership roles. Involving youth in leadership roles and planning committees, as well as implementing their ideas in programmatic strategies, can help ensure that the program activities are interesting and relevant. They also give youth "a say" in what's happening in the program. In addition, opportunities to learn and practice decision making, self control, and responsibility are important. Programs in which youth learn positive ways to express emotion, communicate with and respect others, and reduce interpersonal conflict will not only attract youth, but will give them potentially life saving skills that will aid them to life-long success.

<u>Opportunities</u>	<u>Interest and Relevance</u>	<u>Competence</u>	<u>Autonomy-Related</u>	<u>Relatedness</u>
<p>Have programs and activities available in their community</p> <p>Have programs and activities in locations where youths will go</p> <p>Have access to the opportunities</p> <p>Have awareness of the programs and activities (i.e., marketing, someone refers them)</p> <p>Have financial resources to support involvement</p> <p>Want to experience new opportunities one hasn't done before</p> <p>Have time to participate (not engaged in other activities such as home responsibilities, jobs, other extracurricular activities)</p> <p>Have a stable enough home environment so connections can be made to an activity domain</p>	<p>Are bored and want something to do</p> <p>Want to hang out</p> <p>Seek out opportunities for enjoyment, fun, and excitement</p> <p>Desire novelty, satisfy curiosity, or because of aesthetic value</p> <p>Experience creativity and resourcefulness</p> <p>Perceive the activity or outcome as meaningful</p> <p>See a match between the program and one's personal goals and values</p> <p>Contributes to the community/makes a difference/desire to help</p> <p>Meets needs</p> <p>Desire physical and psychological safety</p> <p>Desire to increase the quality of one's life</p> <p>Expand horizons</p>	<p>Learn new skills</p> <p>Improve skills</p> <p>Achieve personal goals</p> <p>Experience a challenge</p> <p>Experience mastery and accomplishment</p> <p>Practice and apply skills</p> <p>Get help with work</p> <p>Display skills at which one is good</p> <p>Display effort over-time</p> <p>Compare skills to others</p> <p>Relieve stress</p> <p>Enhance fitness/Get in shape</p> <p>Get stronger</p> <p>Enhance appearance</p>	<p>Experience and display personal control</p> <p>Exercise choice in what they want to do</p> <p>Develop and display one's own personal identity</p> <p>Exercise independence</p> <p>Desire to accomplish a goal and work hard at something</p> <p>Experience a sense of responsibility and ownership</p> <p>Desire for consistency, sense of order, and predictability</p> <p>Parents or significant others make me attend; or want me to attend</p>	<p>Experience caring and belonging</p> <p>Connections with adults and peers</p> <p>Gain social acceptance</p> <p>Be with / make friends</p> <p>Be part of a group or team</p> <p>Get approval from significant adults</p> <p>Enjoy and respect the adults</p> <p>Be with caring adults of whom one is attached</p> <p>Experience relationships with caring adults</p> <p>Receive recognition and reinforcement for involvement</p> <p>Experience inclusion in settings that value diversity</p> <p>Perceive the activity as fitting with their own self-identity</p>

What are Some of the Barriers that Prevent Youth from Attending ?

There are many reasons why youth don't attend 21st CCLC and other related programs. Youth are very dependant on location. Those youth most in need of these types of programs often don't have transportation that allows them to travel outside of their neighborhoods. Many live miles away from schools, community organizations, and other sites where programs may operate. In addition, youth may not have a program nearby at a cost they can afford. Youth may also be unaware that a program is available.

Another primary reason youth don't attend these types of activities is because they are not interested in what the programs offer. The 21st CCLC isn't seen as interesting or fun. Their friends are not there.

Yet a third reason youth don't attend pro-social activities and programs such as 21st CCLC is due to time. Youth participate in other competing activities such as watching television, "hanging out" with friends, or other means of social recreation. They also may work outside the home or help at home with chores or watching younger siblings.

While this brief can't address the economic barriers of location, work, and family responsibilities, it does provide valuable information that may be helpful to 21st CCLC grantees as they aim to promote engagement and retention among program participants.

Final Thoughts on Youth Engagement and Retention

Attracting youth and keeping them involved in 21st CCLC and other programs requires multiple, evolving strategies focused on the recruitment and retention of youth participants. Although no single strategy will address all the challenges related to engaging youth, providing engaging and meaningful opportunities, involving youth in program planning and leadership, implementing interesting and relevant activities, creating strategies to welcome and foster relationships with youth, and providing skill-building activities that allow youth to successfully experience new challenges will all attract and interest youth in 21st CCLC and other activities.

Those 21st CCLC that address these developmental and motivational needs and interests of youth are better able to reach at-risk youth and provide them with sufficient experiences to make positive differences in academic achievement and healthy development. Concentrated efforts focused on a targeted population that attends regularly and participates with interest are certain to support positive outcomes for Ohio youth.

The OSU College of Social Work partners with the Ohio Department of Education to provide research based training and technical assistance to 21st CCLC Grantees in Ohio. For more information, please contact Dawn Anderson-Butcher ; anderson-butcher.1@osu.edu and/or Diane. Scneider-Farmer@ode.state.oh.us).