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4-H Mentoring: Youth and Families with Promise

In an effort to reduce and prevent juvenile delinquency, Utah State University (USU) Cooperative Extension Service has made it a priority to promote developmental assets in at-risk youth. Developmental assets include, but are not limited to, family support, relationships with nonparent adults, school engagement, resistance skills, and a sense of purpose. The State 4-H office currently provides leadership for this work as part of their overarching mission to “assist youth in acquiring knowledge, building character, and developing life skills in a fun learning environment that will enable them to become self-directing, productive members of society.”

The 4-H Mentoring: Youth and Families with Promise program (4-H YFP) is a prevention program designed to enhance the developmental assets of at-risk youth, ages 10-14. This program targets youth and families who have below-average school performance, poor social skills, and/or weak family bonds. Youth are referred to the program by school counselors, teachers, and administrators, as well as other youth-serving organizations. This program consists of three components:

- **One-to-one Mentoring** – Volunteer mentors work directly with youth to build academic and social skills
- **4-H Activities** – Club involvement serves to enhance social competencies through leadership opportunities, community service, and group projects
- **Family Night Out** – Group activities are designed to foster family bonds through experiential learning activities

History

The 4-H YFP program originated in 1994 as a response to a community mobilization effort to reduce and prevent juvenile delinquency in Iron County, Utah. The original 4-H YFP program was administered by the local county Extension office with support from State Extension specialists and internal funds from USU. With the awarding of additional internal and external funding, the program was expanded into as many as 25 of Utah’s 29 counties. As of 2004, the State 4-H office oversees the implementation of the 4-H YFP program throughout the state.

Currently, there are 32 program sites serving an average of 20 youth per site and approximately 700 youth statewide.

- 50% of participants are from rural counties
- 40% from urban counties
- 10 % from semi-urban counties

Theoretical and Research Background

The importance of youth interacting with and being influenced by supportive adults is highlighted in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory: "The development of the child is enhanced through her increased involvement, from childhood on, in responsible, task-oriented activities outside the home that bring her into contact with adults other than her parents" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 282). In light of ecological systems theory, the developers of 4-H YFP hypothesized that the integration of mentoring and family interventions into established youth development programs, such as 4-H, would reinforce and enhance the state-wide mission of promoting developmental assets. This hypothesis is supported by emerging research which suggests that integrating mentoring into existing youth programs is a promising strategy for youth development (e.g., Kuperminc, et al., 2005).

The program's integrative approach is consistent with conclusions drawn from research and reviews of youth development programs regarding programmatic characteristics that lead to positive outcomes (e.g., Cress, 2004; Lerner, 2006). Characteristics of effective programs typically include caring adolescent-adult relationships, designs that are long-term, and approaches that incorporate multiple aspects of the youth development framework (e.g., National Research Council, 2002). The youth development framework, as described by Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray and Foster (1998), includes (a) program elements that present youth with new roles and responsibilities, (b) support for youth, and (c) a focus on enhancing internal assets and competencies. The design of 4-H YFP supports the enhancement of developmental assets by providing youth with new roles, relationships, and responsibilities, which are supported and reinforced across programmatic components (Mentoring, 4-H, and Family Night Out).

Program Goals

Short-term goals:

- Improved academic performance
- Enhanced social competencies
- Strengthened family bonds

Long-term goals:

- Increased developmental assets
- Decreased juvenile delinquency

Program Components

Once youth are enrolled into the program, 4-H YFP utilizes a multi-pronged approach to achieve program goals.

One-to-one Mentoring

Each youth is matched with a volunteer mentor – typically a young adult – recruited through a local university, the family’s religious congregation, or community organizations. Mentors meet regularly with the mentees for 1-2 hours each week engaging them in a variety of learning activities (academic, athletic, cultural, etc.). In each interaction, mentors serve as motivators and positive role models.

4-H Clubs

Youth in the YFP program participate in local 4-H clubs, which provide participants opportunities to develop social competencies and mastery in a variety of subject areas. Clubs typically meet 6-12 times a year and typically consist of 6-10 youth per adult. The 4-H program emphasizes a “learn-by-doing” approach to education and helps youth develop responsibility, leadership, self-direction, as well as interpersonal and life skills. Youth are exposed to the concept of generosity and serving others by participating in organized service projects. Through these interactions, 4-H YFP participants develop friendships with peers and a sense of belonging in a positive social network.

Family Night Out Activities

Program youth, parents or guardians, and mentors participate in monthly “Family Night Out” (FNO) group activities that are organized by local YFP site coordinators. Through FNO, youth and parents have an opportunity to participate in fun and educational experiential activities together with the mentors. The objective of the FNO component is to strengthen family bonds and to improve parent-youth communication using themes such as: building trust, kindness, positive communication, and working together.

Mentor support

Mentors are supported by personal contact from their site coordinator twice a month. Contacts are used to offer encouragement, provide on-going training, obtain progress reports, assure that quality mentoring is regularly occurring, and to resolve any concerns or obstacles the mentors may be experiencing.

Partnerships and Collaborations

Collaborations and partnerships play an important role in the support and implementation of 4-H YFP at both the state and county level. Collaborations help off-set program costs and foster community involvement and ownership. Financial and in-kind support has been, and continues to be, generously offered by these partners. A sampling of these partnerships is detailed below.

State:

- *Utah State University’s Department of Family, Consumer, and Human Development (FCHD):* Faculty from FCHD department oversees the statewide program evaluation.
- *Utah Mentoring Partnership (UMP):* The UMP conducts promotional events and fosters awareness of mentoring programs around the state. State 4-H YFP staff serves in the state UMP organization and county staff provides leadership in local UMP chapters.

County and Community:

- *Colleges and Universities:* Brigham Young University, College of Eastern Utah, Southern Utah University, Utah State University, and Utah Valley State College assist with the recruitment of volunteer mentors and/or provide on-campus facilities for mentor training. Utah State University Athletics also provides tickets to sporting events.
- *County Cooperative Extension Services:* Office space, secretarial support, and office supplies are provided for program personnel. USU Extension agents provide local supervision of staff, ensure integrity of the program so it meets university and program standards, and train staff to follow university procedures including civil rights policies as they relate to discrimination. County vehicles are also made available to 4-H YFP staff.
- *Intermountain Healthcare* in Washington County helps with meals for FNO activities.
- *Local Program Advisory Boards:* Representatives from community partnerships form advisory boards, which provide input and suggestions for successfully implementing local programs. Advisory Board members serve on committees that assist with fund raising, grants, activities, and service opportunities.
- *Parks and Recreation* in Tooele County offers services and facilities for mentoring activities for free or at a reduced cost.
- *School Districts and Juvenile Courts:* Formal Memorandums of Understanding grant 4-H YFP staff access to school and court facilities. School and court officials provide referrals and serve on local 4-H YFP Advisory Boards.

Program Evaluation

Annual evaluations of the YFP program include:

- Youth reports of academic achievement, social competency, and family bonds.
- Parent reports of youth academic achievement, social competency, and family bonds.
- Mentor reports of youth academic achievement, social competency, and family bonds.
- Assessment of the fidelity of program implementation.

Outcomes and Impacts

Outcome reports are annually prepared by faculty in the USU Department of Family, Consumer, and Human Development. Consistently, evaluations have documented significant improvements, as reported by parents and children, on all targeted goals. Parents and children report improved academic performance, enhanced social competencies, and strengthened family bonds. Additionally, program families tend to report decreased delinquent behavior and increased parental efficacy.

Recognition and Awards

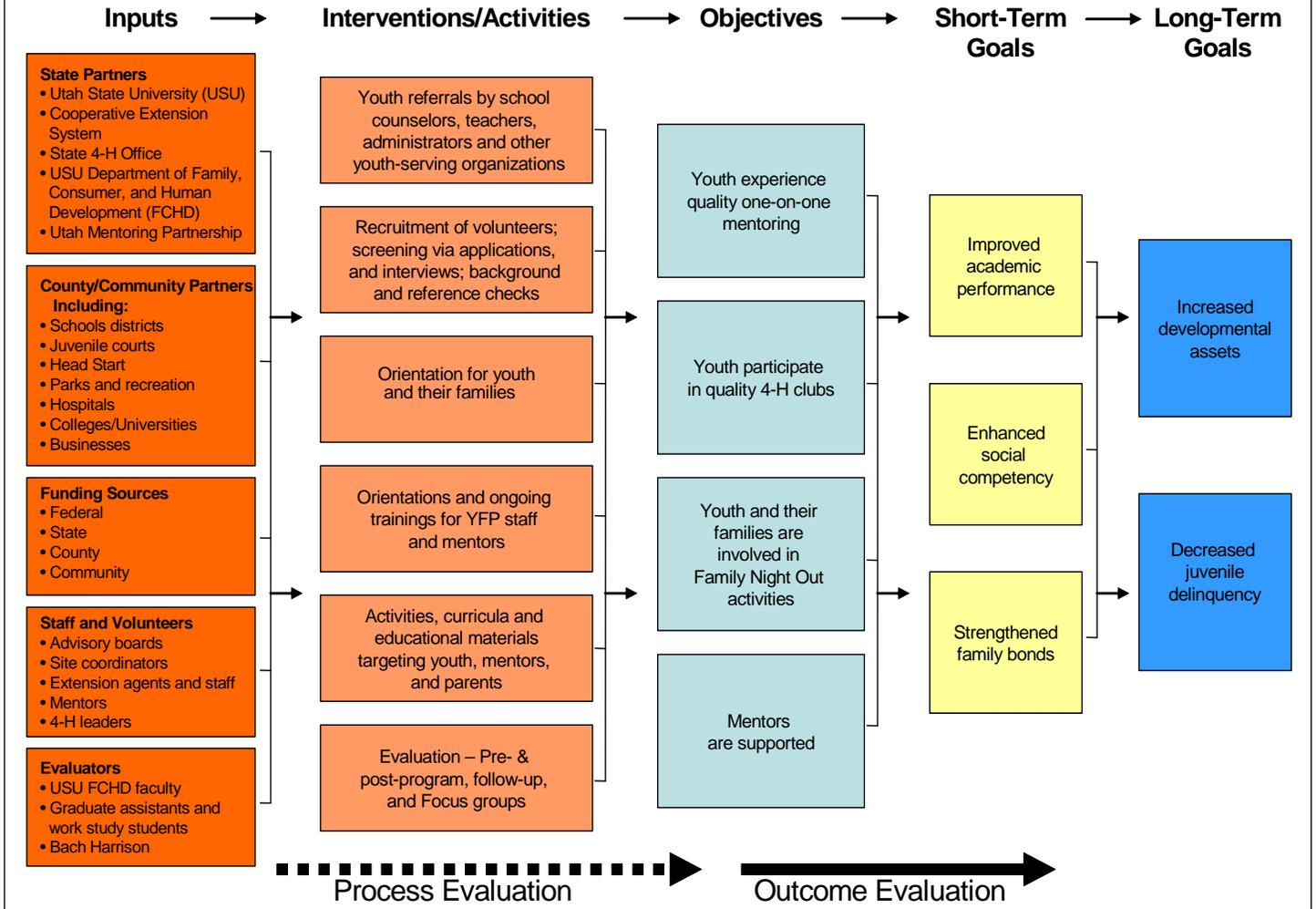
- 2002 Model Program Evaluation Award (USDA, CSREES, CYFAR)
- 2003 Red Wagon Award (Utah Governor's Commission on Volunteers)
- 2006 National Program of Distinction (National 4-H Headquarters)
- 2006 Family Strengthening Award (Annie E. Casey Foundation)

Logic Model

4-H Mentoring: Youth and Families with Promise

Problem Statement: Many youth in Utah are at risk for: below average school performance, poor social skills, and weak family bonds.

Underlying assumption of design: "The development of the child is enhanced through her increased involvement, from childhood on, in responsible, task-oriented activities outside the home that bring her into contact with adults other than her parents" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 282).



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