

YOUTH RECREATION PROGRAMS: HOW DO YOUR SERVICES MEASURE UP?

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ABSTRACT: Leisure activities are important for children and youth to develop an identity, explore options, and develop interests. It is through free-time activities that one develops positive social behaviors, cooperative skills, and leadership. Over the past twenty-five years the importance of leisure activities for youth have been well documented on the impact of specific programs. Most professionals working with youth are left with questions on how to measure the impact of free-time offerings to youth. In times where economic resources are limited, there is limited opportunity to offer services that do not show direct impact on the clientele.

Many different approaches can be used to measure and document the results and impact of free-time involvement by youth. There are many techniques beyond the keeping of attendance records that can support quantity and quality of service offerings to youth. Some examples of measurement techniques include: dissemination of good practices; seminars, conferences, and workshops; publications; behavior change approach; a comprehensive self-assessment; pre- and posttests; citing studies; external endorsements; research partnerships with the university; youth driven initiatives; and monitoring drop-outs.

The purpose of this article is to highlight a range of evaluation techniques that can assist practitioners in identifying the benefits of their programs. These suggestions are drawn from the youth recreation field but have broad applicability to the evaluation of services in general. Although the meanings given to leisure and recreation are neither unambiguous nor universally agreed upon (Godbey, 1981), there is general consensus that leisure activities are not only ends providing immediate gratification and enjoyment, but also means for attaining long-range personal and social goals. Kleiber, Larson, and Csikszentmihalyi (1986) and Mobily (1989) identified that leisure activities are very important to the adolescent because they provide opportunities to explore and form identity, potency and autonomy.

For youth, leisure participation is often seen as part of the learning process where individuals seek to establish their own identity and acquire knowledge of their sociocultural environment, practice social behavior and cooperative skills, achieve specific intellectual or physical attainments, and also explore a variety of peer, family, and continuity roles (Iso-Ahola, 1980). Leisure is considered a primary context for adolescent development because it is an open and expressive aspect of their lives;

and it allows them to get feedback on personal identities and role learning (Hayworth and Smith, 1976; Kleiber and Kelly, 1980). In this way, understanding leisure and the utility of youth recreation programs is an important component of effective youth work.

Research on adolescence and leisure gained momentum in the 1970s after Csikszentmihalyi, Larson, and Prescott (1977) conducted one of the first empirical studies on adolescents and leisure. Their study was based on the premise that social-psychological forces during adolescents' development stage could be better understood if one knew what adolescents did in their free-time during a typical week, why they did what they did, and how they felt when they did it (Caldwell, Smith, & Weissinger, 1992). Over the past twenty-five years the importance of leisure activity for youth has been well documented (Mobily, 1989; Iso-Ahola and Crowley, 1991). However, most of the existing research focuses on the importance of leisure, with little attention directed to measuring the outcomes of programs and services. Specifically, there is a need to understand what elements of leisure services have the greatest impact on youth. A review of the literature indicates numerous studies that have examined leisure experiences or existing programs for youth at risk. However, very few studies have examined the effects of recreation and leisure as an intervention technique with specific measurable benefits.

For those involved in intervention with youth, it is easy to observe that involvement and participation can be a means to a beneficial end. The benefits of such participation are numerous. Regardless of the organization, program offering, or type of recreational opportunities involved, it is clear that the contributions to youth are important and significant. But the pressures brought about by almost two decades of fiscal restraint have often confused the clear focus of the benefits of leisure services.

The questions often asked of service providers for youth are: What works? How can I measure whether services and programs provided to youth are having a positive impact? How can I document that services and programs are meeting the agency's mission and goals? In times where economic resources are limited, taxpayers are increasingly reluctant to support activities without evidence that they are effective. Consequently it is imperative for publicly supported agencies and organizations to be able to measure and evaluate their services.

Oftentimes child and youth care workers and youth recreation programmers are highly skilled at developing and implementing quality programs and services aimed at the needs of youth, but fall short on the development of tools and creation of resources to measure the impact of their programs. Determining whether program goals are achieved requires carefully designed evaluation methods. Too often, however, formal evaluation of prevention or intervention impact of programs is missing (Witt, Crompton & Baker, 1995).

Most of the existing reporting of services for youth focuses on what is offered with little attention given to the evaluation of the effectiveness of the program. As a result, youth programs often are supported by soft

money, which constantly fluctuates to reflect changing political agendas at the local, provincial/state, and federal levels. Often programs are developed under "new initiatives" funding sources, which have a finite lifespan. There is a need to evaluate the impact of services to secure permanent funding for continued quality services for youth.

It is well established that decision makers who allocate funding need valid and reliable information on the benefits and evidence of programs. Yet, many practitioners have lost the ability to articulate the benefits of the services and have fallen prey to evaluation, planning, and budget debates. While it may be easy to demonstrate the importance of leisure, it is more difficult to prove that the specific programs offered to youth have specific benefits.

Strategies for justifying programs and services

Many different approaches can be used to measure and document the results and impact of youth involvement in leisure services. These same approaches are highly relevant to a range of youth-oriented services. A combination of methods should be used in order to have the greatest impact on decision makers. When selecting different methods and tools for evaluation and justification of services, a number of questions should be considered: What human resources are needed to support these methods? At whom is the evaluation initiative aimed? What are the economic constraints to the initiative? Is the initiative appropriate to the agency mission? Oftentimes, evaluations of program successes are demonstrated by attendance records, number of programs offered, or rate of participation. There are many other techniques which can help enhance those statistics and support not only quantity of services but attest to the quality of those services as well. The following represents some strategies for justifying and supporting existing programs and services for youth.

Dissemination of good practices

Community members working with youth and recreation/leisure services can create a valid working document supporting best practices in the area. Each person could submit information on "best programming" or "best evaluation" practices in their agencies. This document could be a valuable vehicle for sharing information and developing community partnerships. The best practices could be compiled and submitted to policy makers, parent or school groups, or funding agencies to demonstrate the innovations and impact of services.

Seminars, conferences and workshops

Information can be shared at many different levels on evaluation tools and techniques. At the local or regional level, a workshop can be held at regular intervals (once a year) with the specific intention of sharing ideas on the evaluation of the impact of services. There could be representatives from the provincial/state and federal level, attending the workshops and reporting different techniques, and innovations in program evaluation.

Publications

Others working with youth can potentially benefit from the knowledge generated by successful program offerings. It is often difficult to find extra time to share successes, especially in a written format. Many journals with an orientation towards scientific methods fail to offer a forum for documenting the success of single programs. Examples where this information can be disseminated include: journals aimed at professionals working with youth, agency newsletters where sharing information on the success and impact of services is the focus, and internet and listserv sources.

Focus on changes in specific behaviors

Youth service agencies can document changes of specific behaviors of youth in programs. Specifically, measures could be taken on changes to: attitude, healthy behaviors, risky behaviors, and/or level of involvement in leisure-time activities.

Self-assessment

Youth in programs should have a continual opportunity to assess their own development, as a result of their participation in leisure and other services. This can be carried out in an informal manner, such as a small group discussion, or in a format which is more structured, such as a questionnaire, a midprogram evaluation, or an interview with structured questions. Testimonials from program participants can be a powerful method to justify the importance of specific programs, as well as the existence of services.

Pre- and posttests on specific elements of services

One way to document the impact of services is to conduct an evaluation at the beginning and end of the service. The evaluation should be developed in partnership with the agency mission and the program goal. In order to carry this out, a formal evaluation procedure must be in place before the program begins. This will involve some extra work, but should pay off at the end if some changes are discovered longitudinally. When using this evaluation design caution is advised. Witt, Crompton, and Baker (1995) suggest that in order to rule out a number of competing explanations for changes from a pre- and posttest design, it is important to have a comparison or control group of youth not in the program being measured.

Looking beyond traditional evaluation methods

Reviewing the literature and evaluation of other disciplines, and collecting appropriate data to support program impact is imperative. If the focus of an agency is to improve the self-concept and self-esteem of youth, self-esteem inventories or self-concept scales can be used to evaluate the impact of services. If the central focus of youth services is to

improve school attitude and stay-in-school behavior, the school might be able to provide attendance records and school grades. There are many tools available to evaluate different aspects of a program. To determine different methods of evaluation outside a specific discipline, one step might be to establish a relationship with a university or college nearby and work in cooperation to design an evaluation approach that would suit a particular agency.

Cite the studies

Join with other youth service agencies and compile benefits of services. The Ontario government created a book listing benefits of Parks and Recreation (Parks and Recreation Federation of Ontario, 1992). This book helped public leisure services gain support, listing hundreds of studies showing the benefits of services.

Site visits from other youth agencies endorsing services

Inviting other youth providers to visit the programs offered at the agency serves as a valuable first step in a partnership and also provides the agency with an external evaluation of the program and services. An outside evaluation could offer evidence to support claims of participation, program tangibility, program reliability, program quality, and the responsiveness of the program to the needs of youth in the community.

Research partnership with university or other partners

If designing methods for evaluating a specific program is difficult, contact a partner to help out. A research partnership with another community agency or university or college can increase the tools and techniques available without significant effort. There may be funding sources for evaluation of specific services and programs that are unknown to a particular agency.

Youth-driven initiatives

Keep track of all of the youth-driven initiatives in the agency. It is a powerful demonstrator of the impact of services to document the leadership and community initiatives of the youth in your agency. For example: how much money did youth in programs raise for community groups? How many hours of volunteer service were the youth in the programs involved in? What community initiatives were implemented as a result of the youth in the programs?

Follow the drop-outs

If possible, compare the youth in recreation programs to youth that have dropped out of the programs. Are there significant differences? Find out reasons for dropping out and include them for justification of different types of services that would reach different youth.

An example of a measurement initiative

The Concordia University Inner-City Youth program offered free leisure and recreation services, during before-and-after-school hours, to 400 children and youth in inner-city schools. The inner-city youth project was aimed at formulating a permanent structure offering free leisure services and programs to preadolescents and adolescents. The program offered leisure activities such as sports, drama, dance, and arts and crafts, and was intended to provide youth a range of positive opportunities and experiences. The program included university students as role models and program leaders.

In order to evaluate the impact of participation, a pre- and posttest evaluation design was used. At the beginning and end of every school year for a three-year period, children and youth participating in the programs were asked to complete a questionnaire containing three sets of questions. The first set of questions was aimed at self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965), the second set of questions looked at leisure attitude (Ragheb and Beard, 1982), and the third set of questions focused on leisure experience (Caldwell, Smith and Weissinger, 1992), specifically, boredom, challenge, anxiety, and awareness related to leisure. Qualitative measures were collected through an interview process with participants and program leaders.

The analysis of the results showed a significant difference in self-esteem for children and youth who participated in the program over the three years. There were also significant positive changes in selected items such as attitudes towards free-time and decreased anxiety and boredom.

By collecting data on the program, the evaluation also included gender differences on items, and differences among different age groups of children. The results were important to the development of new programming initiatives, and in the justification of funding support for before- and after-school programs.

This example shows that it is not complicated to evaluate youth services. Information generated from youth program evaluation initiatives will not only lead directly to enhancing the quality of programs for youth, but will also help to provide necessary evidence to better position youth providers. In order to offer continuous consistent services for youth, there needs to be a greater collective effort in justifying services. Youth serving agencies need to work together in partnership and collaboration to share tools and tricks of the trade in order to make evaluation an easier task.

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