

## **Youth as Partners in Program Evaluation**

The process of program development is frequently depicted as being made up of three distinct, but related, sub-processes. These are program planning, program implementation, and program evaluation. More simply stated, program development is about deciding what to do, doing it, and determining what happened.

Extension has long valued client input into program development and can point to many examples where local citizens have played an active role in the process. But one group of citizens disproportionately under-represented in the process of program development is youth, even when the program in question is purported to exist for their benefit. Furthermore, the phase of program development in which youth are least likely to be involved appears to be program evaluation.

### **Youth and Program Planning**

Historically, adults have taken the lead in deciding what programs are needed and how they should be conducted. Recently, however, there has been a widespread infusion of youth representation onto various planning boards, councils, and committees. This infusion of young people has begun to result in programs which more accurately respond to the needs of youth.

But in many cases, the number of youth invited to be a part of these planning groups has been insufficient to affect the overall design of the resulting program. One or two young people serving on a council or board with a couple dozen adults often does more harm than good.

### **Youth and Conducting Program**

Young people, however, are often called upon to help conduct programs. Perhaps it is because the adults who planned the program realized that there weren't enough adults to go around to do all of the tasks they identified. So adults turn to young people to help implement what they have planned. I've also observed numerous occasions where young people were asked to perform many of the tasks adults find distasteful, tedious, or boring.

### **Youth and Evaluation**

But youth involvement in program evaluation appears to be less prevalent than in either program planning or program implementation. I am convinced that young people are excellent program evaluators and are often more likely to act on the findings of their evaluation than are adults. If a program doesn't meet their needs, they don't come back. (Perhaps all of those young people who drop out of youth organizations when they reach puberty have been evaluating our programs all along!)

As a self-proclaimed advocate of youth involvement, the toughest part of writing this piece was coming to terms with the fact that I was not blameless in contributing to the exclusion of young people in program evaluation. I offer the following as an admission of guilt.

For the past thirteen years, I have served as a consultant to a statewide youth conference which helps young people acquire the skills they need to initiate community action on issues of concern to

them. The planning group, by design, is made up of nine youth and nine adults. The youth and adults have equal input into the design of the program. Similarly, they have equal responsibility for implementation. But, about a year ago, I came to the realization that I alone had sole responsibility for evaluation. I formulated the evaluation questions, based upon my interpretation of the conference's purpose. I decided on the methods for gathering data. And if I forgot to duplicate the evaluation instrument and bring it to the conference, there would be no evaluation of the conference that year! I was truly humbled two years ago when a sixteen-year-old committee member asked me if I remembered to bring copies of the evaluation form. I was honest and sheepishly admitted that I had forgotten to bring them.

On the drive home, I began to think about how an evaluation might be different if youth were involved in the development of the evaluation plan. Is it possible that young people might view the intended outcomes of a program differently than do adults? Could it be that young people would identify different indicators of success than adults? Would they choose to measure those indicators in the same manner as adults? Would they assign the same meaning to the findings? Would they use the information collected about a program differently than adults? The more I thought about the answers to those questions, the more committed I became to the notion of involving youth as partners in program evaluation.

Back in my office, fully committed to involving youth in program evaluation, I walked over to a bookcase which contained my ever-expanding collection of evaluation texts and journals. I pulled down one of the landmark works on the topic of empowerment evaluation thinking it would have something to offer on how to effectively engage young people in the evaluation process. I turned to the index only to discover that the word "youth" was nowhere to be found! I went to another text. Still no "youth" in the index. And another. Same result. Initially, I was somewhat relieved by the fact that I was not alone among my evaluation colleagues in terms of how I had approached evaluation of youth programs. Later, however, I was saddened by the fact that I fear we as evaluators may have missed out on so much valuable insight by failing to fully engage young people in program evaluation.

Recently, a number of cutting-edge initiatives have begun to more formally examine the potential contributions that young people can make to program evaluation. In the latest issue (Spring 2001) of *The Evaluation Exchange* (a publication of the Harvard Family Research Project or HFRP), Jennifer Smith describes the results of a series of focus group and individual interviews with both adults and youth who participated in youth-led research or evaluation projects. From an evaluation perspective, benefits of youth involvement included new perspectives on how to collect data, more accurate analysis and interpretation of data, and increased perceptions of legitimacy of the evaluation project by some stakeholder groups. Beyond the benefits to the evaluation effort itself, additional outcomes identified by participants in the interviews included the opportunity to develop a healthy youth-adult relationship and the opportunity for young people to make a positive impact on their community.

The findings of the HFRP study were not unlike those of a study on the impacts of youth on adults and organizations conducted by Zeldin, et. al. (2000) which concluded that "the mutual contributions of youth and adults can result in a synergy, a new power and energy that propels decision-making groups to greater innovation and productivity."

Earlier this year, The University of Michigan and the Center for Community Change, as a part of its Lifting New Voices project, sponsored a symposium which addressed such topics as the changing

