Management Matters: Sustaining Funds for Youth Development Programs

Karen E. Walker

Drawing on data collected through evaluations of youth development (YD) programs, including those offered in community–and school-based after-school programs, this article describes practices that support program managers’ quests for funds that will sustain programs. Designing YD activities to incorporate skills building (including educational) and recreational and fun activities for adolescents can enlarge the resource pool to include funds for educational activities and youth engagement. Strong behavioral management of programs encourages youth attendance and provides a safe environment to develop positive peer and adult relationships, both of which are crucial to YD. Strong attendance, in turn, can keep program costs in line with expectations and reduce the marginal costs for additional participants. Faithful implementation of previously tested program models increases the likelihood that the program will be effective, and positive outcomes are essential to sustained funding.

KEY WORDS: funding, program management, sustainability, youth development, youth programs

Providing youth development (YD) opportunities to young people has great appeal to people who work with adolescents from low-income families or impoverished neighborhoods. It resonates with ideals of providing opportunities to the disadvantaged, and reminds us all that adolescence is a time of tremendous growth when young people need appropriate guidance and support to thrive.

Voluntary youth serving organizations have long sought to provide young people with safe havens, where they have opportunities to forge relationships with adults who help them to broaden their horizons.

Boys & Girls Clubs of America has been in existence for a hundred years, as have organizations such as the YMCA, YWCA, 4H, and Big Brothers Big Sisters. Many community-and school-based after-school programs from New York to San Francisco offer low-income youth opportunities that their families might otherwise not be able to afford. These include opportunities to learn new skills in areas such as the arts, sports, leadership, and civic engagement, and to develop and nurture friendships with other youth in supportive environments.

As Pittman and colleagues1 point out in their commentary elsewhere in this journal supplement, the issue is not whether opportunities for YD exist but whether opportunities that encourage young people’s development are woven into the fabric of the institutions and communities in which youth live. Creating such opportunities requires a fundamental commitment to YD as well as funding for staff, materials, training, and organizational infrastructure. Pittman’s group calls for necessary systemic and integrated approaches to broaden developmental opportunities and interest in their funding. However, such efforts are long-term undertakings that demand the attention of policy makers and advocates in the broader YD field that are not addressed by the short-term funding needs of program managers. But, there are steps that managers can take to foster sustained investments in their activities. This article describes strategies related to designing, planning, and implementing YD activities.

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The YD Versus Academic Instruction

Problem

In the early 1990s, private funders and youth advocates exhibited great enthusiasm about positive YD. The excitement among funders was typical for those hoping to identify new approaches for addressing social policy issues (in this case, the two-pronged problem of unsupervised children and youth, and inadequate educational achievement). Over time, the initial enthusiasm ebbed. Although crime rates among young people began to fall in the mid to late 1990s, no strong evidence emerged that the presence of YD activities were responsible for the declines. And the evidence that YD programs could raise academic performance to any significant degree was mixed.2–5

Mounting evidence that the effects of YD programs on young people’s behaviors in key policy areas are less than initially hoped has threatened funding, especially since funders’ interest in documenting the effectiveness of programs has risen steadily over the past 10 years. For this reason, an entire section on evaluation consisting of four articles focused on various aspect of this essential process to sustain funding is included in this journal supplement. The decline in funding has not been as steep as it might have been because parents needing safe places for their children support after-school programs. Yet there has been little growth in funding, and competition for currently available funds has increased, with greater expectations attached to available funds than in past years. As YD programming has come under increased scrutiny, state and local funding for after-school programs have increased as policy makers work to expand academic supports for young people in low-performing schools. A struggle over how to use available funds arose between YD advocates, who hoped to provide youth with opportunities that were not available in schools and intentionally were unlike school, versus those primarily concerned with youths’ academic performance.

This debate has been unproductive, in part, because it has created an artificial and unnecessary division between those who emphasize young people’s educational needs in contrast to developmental opportunities. After-school programs that emphasize developmental opportunities often give short shrift to the planning of educational activities, offering tutoring or homework help. Our organization has demonstrated that such efforts provide children with the space and time to complete their homework, but they do not make any headway in children’s achievement, thus leaving funders dissatisfied.3,6

On the other side of the debate, there are programs that have emphasized educational achievement and sought ways to provide educationally oriented activities. For example, in the Irvine Foundation’s Communities Organizing Resources to Advance Learning (CORAL), which operates in five California cities, early programming emphasized project-based learning connected to school standards. However, project-based learning requires significant teaching skills and training, and the CORAL cities found themselves struggling to implement it using the paraprofessionals who tend to staff after-school programs. When the Irvine Foundation understood that the sites were struggling with the implementation of learning activities, they focused on a balanced literacy component in addition to an array of other enrichment activities that the cities were offering.6

More commonly, managers who run programs with educationally oriented activities have not thought carefully about how to deliver activities in settings that youth join in voluntarily. As a result, they may not implement features that research has shown to attract young people, such as ensuring that activities are fun, challenging, and provide opportunities to socialize with friends.3,7 This becomes particularly problematic for serving adolescents who are disengaged from school and old enough to leave the school sites on their own.

Below we discuss nine practices or strategies that program managers can use to help sustain their YD programs. Many of these suggestions may seem self-evident, but program evaluations by our group and others have consistently shown that programs that fail to follow these suggestions are less likely to meet program goals.

Plan activities that are both pedagogically sound and fun, for youth and adults

Program managers who see educational activities as part of YD, instead of in competition with it, are likely to have funding advantages over those who do not. Funds for academic supports will continue to be available because education is an ongoing policy issue at federal, state, and local levels. Managers who understand that strong educationally oriented activities can offer opportunities for YD, such as adult support, peer cooperation, and the opportunities to have fun and learn new skills, are more likely to provide educational activities that appeal to young people than do those who focus primarily on academic skill development.

There are two common approaches to designing fun educational enrichment activities, and each approach can engage young people. One is to take a creative, fun topic or skill-building activity and infuse it with academic instruction. Cooking classes can include the use of mathematics skills, as can activities such as Lego-robotics. Model-building activities can include
program managers to assess their resources and needs, ensures that program activities are likely to lead to outcomes, and—if communicated to staff—creates a common understanding of what the program is intended to do. All three of these benefits can contribute to outcomes in the long run, which, in turn, increase the likelihood of receiving funding. Planning tools are available to help program managers develop strong logic models. The Kellogg Foundation, for example, has an on-line logic model guide that can be used in a wide variety of programs.10 For youth programs, Beyond the Bell® provides resources and training for after-school staff that are practical, easy to use, and grounded in research and experience.11

Sustain efforts to ensure high-quality programming encompassing a range of features

Early evidence from YD programs suggests that strong program quality helps ensure program outcomes. The term “high quality” relates to several features of YD programs: First, if a YD program has a specific curriculum or model, managers need to ensure that activities are happening as planned. Second, high quality also refers to the skills that staff members have in helping young people learn new things (either through direct instruction, guidance, or facilitation). Third, it includes staff’s skills in communicating with young people in supportive ways, fostering cooperation among youth, and finding opportunities for leadership. It also, and very importantly, relates to how well staff members manage young people’s behavior and set expectations.

Implement program models that research has identified as effective in achieving desired outcomes with fidelity to increase the likelihood of success

The issue of model fidelity presents a paradox to the YD field, which emphasizes youth voice and choice. On the one hand, evaluation evidence suggests that young people are most likely to show positive outcomes when programs based on evidence of effectiveness are faithfully implemented. For example, in our evaluation of CORAL, we have found that reading scores for young people who go to after-school balanced literacy activities increase when the activities exhibit greater fidelity to the program model. No change is observed in programs in which staff does not adhere to such practices as reading aloud and independent reading.6

Model fidelity, however, may conflict with young people’s increasing desires for independence and choice in adolescence. Although existing evidence is preliminary and anecdotal, our study of adolescent programming in Boys & Girls Clubs suggests that not only must programs be very planful about how to engage
adolescents but also they may need to change program-
ming for adolescents with some regularity to keep them
engaged by its novelty. Club directors have reported
that an activity that attracts young people one year
may not do so the next. From a developmental perspec-
tive, this makes sense: YD programs can offer adoles-
cents flexible settings for identity exploration and skill
development.12 If young people experiment with new
opportunities, it is likely that some, but by no means
all, will want to continue with them over time. Others
may want new opportunities.

How can program managers balance the need for
model fidelity and while providing young people with
opportunities to decide how they would like to spend
their time? Although this is not a question that has been
addressed explicitly in many YD programs, the answer
may lie in developing and testing programs that have
strong relational and management components while
allowing for the introduction of new skill-building ac-
tivities. What this means, however, is that young people
who want to develop strong skills in a particular area
are unlikely to find intensive instruction within general
YD programs.

Assure developmental opportunities for peer
cooperaion and adult support

In the SFBI, we observed that when youth had op-
portunities for peer cooperation, the young people
themselves reported stronger attachments to adults
than in activities with fewer observed opportunities
for peer cooperation. We speculate that when adults
create opportunities for peer cooperation, which is a
key developmental task for adolescents, they create
environments that suit young people’s developmen-
tal stage. Adolescents’ appreciation of such an envi-
ronment may lead them to develop stronger attach-
ments to the adults, which, in turn, can be beneficial to
youth.

Program managers can encourage a wide variety of
methods for peer cooperation. Among them, instruc-
tors can place youth in small groups, or in pairs, to work
on tasks together. They can also assign more skilled
youth as mentors to guide new or novice participants.
Instructors sometimes allow for modest amounts of so-
cializing during activities, or build breaks into more
rigorously scheduled activities as appropriate (such as
in a dance class, when sustained focus on practicing and
learning how to synchronize movement may be desir-
able). Instructors can also play critical roles in model-
ing positive relationships among the group, by intro-
ducing new students to the group, and by mediating
peer interactions to ensure youth treat each other with
respect.

Incorporate strong behavioral management and
organizational structure into YD programming

In a world in which young people are exposed to hours
of structured activity in and out of school, adults may
worry that adolescents do not have sufficient unstruc-
tured time to explore new opportunities. For some, the
idea of strong behavioral management and organiza-
tional structure in YD programming may seem overly
constricting. It is important to recognize that structure
and management can enable exploration. The issue is
not whether young people are exposed to too much
structure and management, but whether they are in set-
tings in which age-appropriate structure and manage-
ment is used. Activity organization and management
are strengthened when youth workers have a plan of
activity for each session, and yet maintain flexibility,
depending on youth progress and interest.

Youth workers should break down sessions into
manageable, age-appropriate, and varied blocks of in-
struction. For example, for younger adolescents, an
hourlong graphic design activity might dedicate the
first 10 minutes to reviewing different elements of de-
sign in posters, have students break into pairs and
spend the next 15 minutes mapping out a design for
their own poster. Pairs would then spend 25 minutes be-
gin to crafting their poster design on the computer and
identify suitable Web images and texts. The last 10 min-
utes would be spent reviewing each pair’s design, shar-
ing useful design strategies, and stating goals for the
next session. Older adolescents, on the other hand, may
need more extended planning periods for more sophis-
ticated projects, and they may be able to spend more
sustained time on projects such as Web magazines.
Adult management of such activities appears very
different from shorter-term projects. Although older
adolescents work more independently than younger
youth, the need for structure and supervision does not
disappear.

Focus carefully, creatively, and aggressively on
strategies to retain young people

The features of program quality discussed above are
not only important in ensuring that activities are devel-
opmentally appropriate but also important in ensuring
that young people participate in activities. To sustain
funding, program managers increasingly need to show
strong and consistent participation.

Although the research on the relationships between
YD program fidelity and quality and youth attend-
dance and outcomes is still in its infancy, our organi-
zation has identified important links among them in
its evaluations of after-school programs. In the SFBI,
on evaluation we found that one of the most powerful
predictors of attendance in activities was how well organized and managed they were: We rated activities on a scale from 1 to 5 on several dimensions, including behavioral management and organization (1 meant very poorly managed, 5 meant excellent management). For each one-point increase in the quality of an activity’s organization and management, there was about a 20 percent rise in young people’s attendance, after controlling for other important quality factors such as the type of activity being offered and the age of the youth in the program. In short, young people attended well-managed and organized activities more regularly than they went to more poorly managed activities. We further found that when young people formed attachments to adults in YD programs, they were more likely to remain in the programs over time than youth who do not form such attachments. They thus receive more exposure to programmatic activities, which, in turn, can strengthen their skills.

To ensure young people’s participation, programs must have methods for monitoring it. In addition, funders want to ensure that programs are reaching the number and type of young people for which they have funded the program. Programs that cannot provide information about attendance, services provided, and population served are at a disadvantage when funders make decisions. Conversely, being able to clearly present to funders the information about service use can be very helpful for program sustainability.

**Be judicious regarding the cost of a program for each participant**

Funders want to know that programs are worth their investment. Although there is no single “ideal” cost, program managers should consider the costs of similar programs that serve similar populations in identifying their costs. As yet, no comprehensive study of YD program costs exists, although at least one is underway. However, some large after-school programs (eg, Los Angeles’ BEST4 and TASC in New York City) report costs of approximately $1,000 to $1,500 per young person per academic year. Public/Private Ventures study of the Extended-Service Schools Initiative suggested that a young person could be served for about $15 a day in such programs. More intensive programs in terms of time or the number of activities in which youth participate will cost more than the less-intensive ones. One of the dilemmas facing YD programs is that they are intended to provide opportunities for a broad range of young people, including those at risk of adverse future behaviors and those who are not at risk. This broad focus presents a challenge because society has not reached a consensus that developmental opportunities, especially those in the after-school hours, should be supported by public funds (although few would deny that such opportunities are good for children). Therefore, unless a program is specifically charged to serve young people with high odds of engaging in problem behaviors, such as youth with juvenile convictions (in which case the future costs of dealing with the problems that emerge is likely to outweigh even high program costs), YD programs receive more limited dollars and must spend them judiciously.

Spending judiciously requires detailed knowledge of the costs of the program—direct providers, materials, transportation, facilities, and administration. Managers also need to know what the average per participant cost is for any given activity and whether the activity sustains young people’s engagement.9

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**References**


