

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.

The author thanks Rebecca Raley for her helpful comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this article. This article draws heavily from research conducted by the staff at Public/Private Ventures over the past 10 years, including Amy J. A. Arbretton, Jean B. Grossman, Carla Herrera, Lauren J. Kotloff, Rebecca Raley, and Karen E. Walker.

Corresponding author: Karen E. Walker, PhD, Public/Private Ventures, 2000 Market St, Suite 600, Philadelphia, PA 19103 (e-mail: kwalker@ppv.org).

Karen E. Walker, PhD, is Senior Fellow, Public/Private Ventures, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Research Professor, Department of Psychology, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia.

● 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 activ-

ities. 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 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

instruction in the physical sciences. The second approach is to take more traditional academic instruction and infuse it with fun. For example, the balanced literacy curriculum that CORAL implemented included the use of incentives and games,⁶ and we have seen similar strategies in other reading activities.³

Research that has examined what attracts older adolescents to activities has shown that they are interested in developing skills in specific areas.^{8,9} It is likely, therefore, that recruiting older adolescents to activities may require the first, less traditional approach, in which having fun is emphasized. Activities that infuse academic instruction into skill-building activities can be very challenging to develop and implement. In the San Francisco Beacon Initiative (SFBI), such activities tended to be of either high or low quality.³ Thus these types of activities must be monitored carefully to ensure the former.

Include a mix of academic enrichment, recreation, and skill building in after-school activities

If funding is available for programs that offer some academically oriented activities, which is so often the case in the current policy environment, staff should work to identify ways to incorporate recreational and desired skill-building activities, including those that foster civic participation and the development of artistic skills. Without such opportunities, adolescents are unlikely to attend the offerings. Therefore, activities should be approached with the following question in mind: How can we make the academic activity fun, engaging, and relevant for this group of young people?

Be realistic about the potential of activities to achieve program goals

Achieving good results is hard work—and many programs, underestimating the amount or type of work to achieve the goals they set for themselves, cannot show positive results. In the current mature funding environment, where there is little growth in funds and increased competition for existing dollars, program managers must clarify the links between their programs' activities and goals in order to increase their odds of achieving the goals. Managers should ask: Are the content and scope of activities likely to achieve the desired goals? Are the goals measurable? Are the planned resources sufficient to achieve the goals?

Increasingly, funders require that programs produce a logic model or a theory of change that clarifies the links between activities, needed resources, and goals. Even if programs are not required to produce one, understanding in some detail the assumptions about why an intervention is effective is good practice. It allows

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.³ 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 programming 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 perspective, this makes sense: YD programs can offer adolescents 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 activities. 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 cooperation and adult support

In the SFBI, we observed that when youth had opportunities 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 developmental stage. Adolescents' appreciation of such an environment may lead them to develop stronger attachments 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, instructors 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 socializing 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 desirable). Instructors can also play critical roles in modeling positive relationships among the group, by introducing 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 unstructured time to explore new opportunities. For some, the idea of strong behavioral management and organizational 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 settings in which age-appropriate structure and management 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 instruction. For example, for younger adolescents, an hourlong graphic design activity might dedicate the first 10 minutes to reviewing different elements of design 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 begin to crafting their poster design on the computer and identify suitable Web images and texts. The last 10 minutes would be spent reviewing each pair's design, sharing useful design strategies, and stating goals for the next session. Older adolescents, on the other hand, may need more extended planning periods for more sophisticated 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 developmentally 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 attendance and outcomes is still in its infancy, our organization 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.³ 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 City⁵) 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.⁷

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

● Conclusion

Youth development managers need to demonstrate their program's quality and effectiveness to both large and small funders, because they may not know where their next dollars will come from, and coalitions of large and small philanthropies are sometimes formed for a common goal. Managers in cities and schools who have successfully transitioned their after-school programs from federal, state, or foundation-funded startups into programs sustained through local dollars and sliding fee scales for families have done so because they have convinced young people, parents, and community members of their worth. Extensive program evaluations showing effectiveness can be expensive and are not feasible for every YD program. However, program managers who can show that they have a good match between program goals and activities, strong attendance rates, and operate programs using demonstrated effective practices are likely to be prepared to garner funds in a competitive fund-raising environment.

REFERENCES

1. Pittman KJ, Martin S, Yohalem N. Youth development as a "big picture" public health strategy. *J Public Health Manag Pract.* 2006;12(6 suppl):S23–S25.
2. Dynarski M, Moor M, Mullens J, et al. *When Schools Stay Open Late: The National Evaluation of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers Programs, First-year Findings.* Report submitted to the US Department of Education. Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research Inc; 2003.
3. Walker KE, Arbreton AJA. *After-School Pursuits: An Examination of Outcomes in the San Francisco Beacon Initiative.* Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures; 2004.
4. Huang D, Gribbons B, Kim KS, Lee C, Baker EL. *A Decade of Results: The Impact of LA's BEST After School Enrichment*

- Program on Subsequent Student Achievement and Performance*. Los Angeles: UCLS Center for the Study of Evaluation; 2000.
5. The After School Corporation (TASC). Fifth-year report. Available at: <http://www.tascorp.org/on>. Accessed April 26, 2006.
 6. Arbreton AJA, Goldsmith J, Sheldon J. *Launching Literacy in After-School Programs: Early Lessons From the CORAL Initiative*. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures; 2005.
 7. Grossman JB, Price ML, Fellerath V, et al. *Multiple Choices After School: Findings From the Extended-Service Schools Initiative*. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures; 2002.
 8. Herrera C, Arbreton AJA. *Increasing Opportunities for Older Youth in After-School Programs*. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures; 2003.
 9. Raley R, Grossman J, Walker KE. *Getting It Right: Strategies for After-School Success*. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures; 2005.
 10. W. K. Kellogg Foundation. Using logic models to bring together planning, evaluation, and action: logic model development guide. 2004. Available at: <http://www.wkkf.org/Pubs/Tools/Evaluation/Pub3669.pdf>. Accessed April 26, 2006.
 11. Learning Point Associates. Beyond the Bell[®] toolkit for after-school program directors and site coordinators. Available at: <http://www.beyondthebell.org/>. Accessed April 26, 2006.
 12. Eccles JS, Barber BL, Stone M, Hunt J. Extracurricular activities and adolescent development. *J Soc Issues*. 2003;59(4):865–889.