Executive Summary

Youth and Philanthropy Program

Conducted by

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This Executive Summary synopsizes a comprehensive evaluation report of the Youth and Philanthropy Program. The report was submitted to the Phoenixville Community Health Foundation (PCHF) by the Human Organization Science Institute of Villanova University, June 2011.

Overview of the Youth and Philanthropy (Y&P) Program

The Y&P Program was developed and funded by PCHF in close partnership with the Phoenixville (PA) Area School District. Launched in 2004, the program has been offered in the Middle School (PAMS) and (PAHS) High School every year since then. Y&P offers students an “opportunity to learn about philanthropy,” defined as “giving of one’s self to address the neediness of others.” Y&P emphasizes that this process be experiential, with students studying the local system on nonprofit health and human service agencies, requesting formal proposals from selected organizations, evaluating the proposals, and making monetary grants to selected organizations. In doing such, the program seeks to engender students’ leadership, communication, decision-making, and team building skills. School staff serves as facilitators for the weekly meetings of Y&P. In the middle school, the program is a sanctioned school activity while in the high school the program is a credit-bearing course. The PCHF provides the funding for grants which has ranged between $15,000 and $27,300 annually over the past seven years.

The Evaluation Design and Methods

Y&P has annually surveyed students to solicit their views on the program as well as seeking ideas for enhancement from the school facilitators and PCHF staff. However, the program has never been rigorously analyzed by an independent evaluator with a spotlight on the measurement of program outcomes. This evaluation featured a pre-post design to assess program impact. A customized survey was designed to gauge the performance of groups of Y&P students compared with classmates. Each Y&P participant was carefully matched with a classmate on key variables (e.g., demographics, school performance). This yielded a total sample of 25 pairs who completed the pre and post tests. A variety of inferential statistics, such as t-tests and multiple regression analyses, was utilized to determine whether the Y&P students significantly outperformed their comparison group colleagues on pertinent indices such as participation in community service and responsibility to help others. In addition, to discover other more qualitative program effects, a series of focus groups and interviews was conducted with key stakeholders: Y&P students, program staff facilitators, PCHF staff, and grant recipients.

Findings, Recommendations and Considerations

Writ large, the evaluators found the Y&P program to be innovative, well run and effective. The quantitative and qualitative results point up numerous areas of impact and insight.

Youth Today: Across both Y&P and non-Y&P students, the findings etch a profile of young persons who manifest deep civic values and back up their views with action. High levels of positive opinion and action are evident in community service and volunteerism. Views about society are heartening as are personal values. To illustrate, “Working toward equal opportunity for all citizens” was deemed essential by 44.3% of the students in contrast to the 24.6% who judged “being well off financially” to be essential.

Program Impact: In this age of assessing measurable outcomes, the analyses related to the matched pair, pre-post design discerned statistically significant positive results in several areas. Y&P students, compared with their classmates who did not participate in Y&P, were significantly more likely:

- To participate in community service and volunteer activities
- To have positive views on their responsibility and future plans to help others
To have a positive outlook on their ability to make an impact through community service

Significant gains were, however, not seen in all areas, such as the students’ awareness of and ability to provide community service, their opinions on the opportunities and challenges faced by others, and the impact people can make.

Themes from the Interviews and Focus Groups: The results of the interviews and focus groups were uniformly and distinctly positive. Y&P drew unanimous praise from students, school personnel, and community agency staff alike. Key themes from the qualitative research (i.e., interviews, focus groups) in the form of the views and perspectives that were reported by various constituencies include:

- **Learning about one's community and the helping network:** Students, upon entry to Y&P, are largely unaware of the non-profit network of health and human service organizations. By the end of Y&P they have an encompassing overview of this system and an in-depth knowledge of several agencies. “I learned so much more about the nonprofit system. In fact I never even knew it existed.”

- **Understanding persons in need:** Some students were surprised to learn that, “in my perfect community,” there are needy persons. They came to understand economic hardship, and learn that unemployment and family need are real. They learned about the causes of poverty and other social problems in an experiential, palpable context, coming to the conclusion that sometimes clients do not bring these conditions on themselves. “At the beginning of the year I thought that we were going to help people who had made their lives bad. But sometimes people can get fired, and it is not their fault.”

- **Developing a community identity:** Particularly in high school, students seem to not merely learn “about” their community but actually begin, as the facilitator put it, “to see that they are part of something bigger” ...to develop a personal tie with their community.

- **Experiencing their own diversity:** Particularly in middle school, the Y&P students are diverse in terms of personal interests, academic performance, race/ethnicity, and socio-economics. They learn from each other and create lasting friendships. Students spoke of breaking through their typical groups and cliques in getting to know one another. “We had to talk to each other and become friends.”

- **Developing life skills:** Students grow substantially in important skills such as communication, listening to others, teamwork, and consensus building. Decision making receives special attention as students learn to collect and analyze data to guide their decisions. “We argued a lot at first but the counselors helped us and we used activities like voting a lot.”

- **Knowledge development:** Students learn facts and processes about social issues, helping professions, health and human service systems, and philanthropy. They develop analytical thinking, word choice, and writing clarity through tasks such as composing their own Mission Statement. Especially impressive were several vital yet subtle distinctions that students could articulate. A poignant example occurred when some residents were not appreciative of gifts the students delivered to their homes. Students’ first reaction was one of irritation at this ungratefulness. Upon deeper group reflection and dialogue, they realized that other forces may have been at work and people might have felt “embarrassed, ashamed or insulted.” This is a quite a realization.

- **Making a difference:** Students realized that “we can make a difference even at our age.” They also realized how even a small sum of money can make a big difference to community agencies and the people they serve. The latter was reinforced by grant awardees who agreed that: “Every dollar helps.”

- **Empowerment:** Because the students are the final decision makers and have ultimate responsibility for their decisions, they spoke of gaining a sense of empowerment described as quite rare and quite
meaningful for people of their age. “You feel a certain empowerment in giving. For a kid this is amazing. It changes you. It builds character.”

- Overcoming hesitancy to volunteer: Certain students noted that it can be a bit intimidating to volunteer on one’s own, but doing it as part of Y&P helps overcomes this hurdle. “I always wanted to get involved but I wasn’t sure how. This class gave me a bridge to helping others.”

- Interacting with those we help: When the students contended that they should have more direct experiences with those whom they ultimately help through Y&P, the evaluators challenged them by asking whether this was driven by a desire for “warm feedback.” While some agreed, others simultaneously built a convincing case that such interaction, where appropriate, is a powerful learning experience sensitizing them to conditions of the poor. “[Before Y&P] I used to think that most people in need were homeless and did not realize that a lot of kids with families don’t even have Christmas presents.”

- Awardees’ views: Grant recipients perceive the program in a very positive light that shines well beyond their individual allocation. One summed it up as follows: “I am impressed by the program. It is intended to engage students to become in charge of responsibility and the decision of spending money, to see the interconnection of everything — nonprofits, money — and not just one day of service. They see the infrastructure, and they are in charge of it themselves. They understand process and this is a deeper meaningful experience for them than just volunteering.”

- The Two Pillars of the Y&P Program: - Experiential Learning and Competent Facilitators: Experiential learning is essential and central to the program. Time and time again the students and others spoke of this real world context. Whether it be interacting with vulnerable populations or speaking with community health professionals or dialogue with FCHP staff, the experiential dimension was singled out as a key component. “In Y&P, helping is not merely described, it is lived.” Of equal import is the presence of competent facilitators who know their community, relate well to students and agency staff alike, are skilled in group processes as well as pedagogy, and embody high civic values.

Recommendations

The evaluators strongly recommend:

1. That key program stakeholders first closely read this report and then gather for a “strategic conversation,” a discussion and action session whose focus is to share reactions to this evaluation report and also to mine the report for planned action towards program improvement, dissemination and possible replication.

2. That the high school program be much better publicized to students, including adding the Y&P class to the “master scheduling board” and creating other channels to inform students of the program, thereby better affording them the opportunity to register for it at the end of the prior academic year.

3. That school personnel work to minimize scheduling conflicts with PAMS, thereby minimizing absences and eliminating the need to devote so much time to rehashing what occurred during the prior session.

4. That the facilitators be trained in a wider set of decision making techniques (e.g., Nominal Group Technique, the Ben Franklin method, MAUT) and teach these techniques to the students. This would enhance the educational dimension of Y&P and show students that there are numerous approaches to decision making and consensus building beyond voting and polling.

5. That attention be given to the suggestion made by several interviewees that the high school program be restricted to juniors and seniors while concomitantly considering a “bridge program” for frosh and sophomores.
6. That high school students who had been in Y&P during middle school return and give a talk to the middle school students during the PAMS orientation.

7. That the program continue to maximize its real world, experiential learning and consider even more interaction where appropriate between students and the persons who actually benefit from their Y&P work.

8. That the Replication Guide and PCHP website be brought up to date.