

# Overarching Principles for Sustainable Partnerships

## Introduction

Creating partnerships with like-minded organizations can be richly rewarding for everyone involved. A solid partnership easily doubles (or more) the “sum of its parts.” Strong partners share resources, complement or support each others’ strengths or weaknesses, and see challenges as opportunities for growth. Sustainable 4-H Science partnerships have good communication networks, distribute rewards and recognition equitably, and ultimately are able to increase the number of youth reached with high quality, 4-H Science programs.

There are several critical “overarching principles” that apply to sustainable partnerships regardless of the type of partner organization (e.g., afterschool providers, universities, science centers, etc.). This section introduction discusses several principles that will enhance program partnership development and sustainability.

## Overarching Principles

### ***Sustainable partnerships start with self-reflection.***

1. *Begin with the end in mind.* Have a vision for where urban 4-H Science programming will be in 3-5 years, based upon statewide strategic planning documents as well as current and projected community needs. Be concrete in stating future programming goals (e.g., number of youth served, types of program offerings, venues, ideal partners, etc.). Commit to becoming (or remaining) a “4-H Science Ready Program” (see also [4-H Science Program Design – 4-H Science Checklist](#)).
2. *Ascertain the informal science education needs (met and unmet) of youth in the community.* Look at resources (human and material) that are available, or needed, to meet those needs. Assess organizational and community capacity to support science programming. Decide if forming a partnership is the most effective way to meet those needs.
3. *Identify the appropriate niche for 4-H Science programs.* The idea here is not to compete with other organizations, but to meet needs that are currently unmet.
4. *Assess current programmatic strengths, opportunities, and challenges.* Take inventory of the current state of 4-H Science programming. Know what is working, and why. Be aware of opportunities for creating new partnerships, acquiring funding, and so forth. Seek to discover the underlying causes of any challenges.
5. *Know what is needed for successful 4-H Science programs.* An accurate assessment of the resources 4-H is able to provide, as well as what the program needs, should guide negotiations with a potential partner. For example, if:
  - 4-H does not have the resources to staff a program, the partner can be asked to either allow their existing staff to take on that role or assist 4-H in recruiting and funding adequate staff to deliver the program.
  - Science equipment and supplies are an issue, partners need to work together to secure necessary materials.





6. *Ascertain the roles suitable for 4-H before entering into a partnership.* Think about what makes the most sense for 4-H regarding program roles and responsibilities. For example:
  - Will 4-H deliver programs directly, or train collaborating staff to deliver programs?
  - Does 4-H want to handle program enrollment, or is this task better suited to the collaborating partner.
  - Is 4-H responsible for pre-program site preparation and clean-up after the program, or does the site provider have staff available to assist?

***Sustainable partnerships share a common vision and similar goals.***

1. *Locate partners with a similar youth development philosophy and goals.* Perform background research on potential partners. Partners with a similar youth development philosophy and goals are more likely to see how a shared vision and collaboration can be built. As preliminary partnering discussions are held, listen for language that relates to the eight *Essential Elements of Positive Youth Development* present in belonging, independence, mastery, and generosity (see also *4-H Science Program Design – 4-H Science Checklist*).
2. *Ensure potential partners understand that 4-H Science is informal science education delivered within a positive youth development framework.* Emphasize that 4-H delivers quality programs (as opposed to activities), and as such will need support (including adequate time) to deliver a regular and ongoing series of educational sessions (see also *4-H Science Program Design – 4-H Science Checklist*).
3. *Strive to create a “true needs, true partners” relationship.* Sustainable partnerships go beyond a letter of support for a grant; they are long-term relationships that complement each others’ organizational goals to create stronger programming.
  - Determine upfront how each partner will benefit from the partnership. All partners need to understand the benefits to partnering with each other. Strive to create balanced partnerships in terms of what each partner brings to the table and the benefits reaped.
  - Complement each other’s resources. Look for opportunities to partner with organizations that strengthen the 4-H Science program, or that have needed resources. For example, 4-H is strong in positive youth development (PYD), and a local science museum may have plenty of volunteers to facilitate youth programs, but they need PYD training.
  - Organizational parameters, expectations, and requirements of *all* parties involved must be considered to avoid turf struggles and issues. Achieve consensus on goals for all partners involved. Come to a joint understanding as to what constitutes partnership success as well as program success.
  - Break program implementation and evaluation processes into component parts. Discuss and agree upon the best roles for each partner (e.g., recruitment, location, program delivery, evaluation, etc.).
4. *Know when to walk away.* 4-H professionals need to be willing to abandon a potential partnering relationship if the partner’s actions do not convey a shared philosophy, appropriate cultural beliefs, a willingness to properly recognize 4-H, or a collaborative spirit to meet all partners’ needs.

## **Sustainable partnerships “put it in writing.”**

1. **Create a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).** The importance of a written contract or MOU cannot be overstated. It is essential that potential partners begin by crafting a MOU that clearly states the intention, roles, cost sharing, and so forth of each organization. Do not forget to include evaluation responsibilities of each partner.
  - **Roles and Responsibilities.** The agreement should cover responsibilities of each partner, expectations and other issues that are important. These issues and agreements are best discussed before program implementation, so there is an agreement to refer to if issues arise after the program begins.
  - **Fiscal Issues.** Quite simply, the MOU should state who pays for what. Include cost-sharing, supplies, salaries, administrative overhead, and so forth. The agreement should identify the fiscal agent, and if payments are to be made to program partners, payment dates and amounts (and any reporting contingencies). If positions are to be shared, outline not only the cost of salary and benefits but office support and travel costs.
  - **Co-Branding.** As part of the MOU, both parties should agree on the level of recognition each partner will receive on respective publications, websites, and other media. Negotiation and compromise are keys to success when marketing 4-H Youth Development programs and branding options to potential partners. There is no question about *whether* the 4-H Emblem should be included on program materials, but do clarify *how* it should be used. Discuss including appropriate recognition of Extension and the land grant university. Reaching an acceptable marketing and branding relationship relative to program components, evaluation strategies, and reports to stakeholders makes it easier for partners to work side-by-side while still having their individual needs met (see also *Marketing and Branding 4-H in Urban Communities*).
  - **Shared Resources.** Quite often a community partner provides the majority of physical resources, especially facilities. Consider what resources 4-H and the land grant university might bring to support program efforts. This may come in the form of existing curriculum, equipment (e.g., robotics kits for camp), PYD training, or specialist expertise needed for a consultation on a specific project.
2. **Review the MOU annually.** While the parameters outlined in the original MOU may not change from year to year, an annual review serves as a check-in for all partners. Consider reviewing the document as part of a regularly scheduled meeting. This self-check may provide an opportunity to congratulate partners on successes to date, and help nip potential problems in the bud.

## **Sustainable partners communicate with and support each other.**

1. **Commit to the partnership.** Partnerships, like any relationship, will have their share of “ups and downs.” Also like any relationship, they need to be nurtured to ensure sustainability. New partnerships will require more effort.
2. **Take small steps.** It’s not necessary to form complicated relationships in the beginning stages of the program. A sound strategy for developing sustainable organizational relationships is to start small and grow the partnership.
3. **Recognize that the journey is shared.** All partners should feel ownership of the work. Be sensitive to what is happening in the partner’s world, as these things may affect the partnership. Make every effort to co-present at conferences, write each other into grants, and serve on each other’s committees. Support partner activities and events!
4. **Revisit the partnership often.** Discuss what’s working well and what’s not so that the relationship continues to evolve and meet changing needs.





5. *Communicate, communicate – and then communicate some more!* Establish regular communication with partners. It is important to engage in frequent communication, even if there is nothing “wrong” at the moment.
6. *Practice patience and perseverance.* Program partners are just as busy as 4-H professionals! It takes time and patience to nurture sustainable partnerships. Cultivate relationships, even if the initial reason for partnering does not work out (e.g., failure to get a particular grant).

### ***Sustainable partnerships work together to design, implement and evaluate programs.***

1. *Stay focused on 4-H Science program goals.* A “golden” opportunity to partner with other organizations will align with 4-H Science goals, needs, and current programming agenda. Otherwise, the partnership could end up adding more work than value. Thoughtfully account for the costs and benefits of such a partnership, and do periodic self-checks to decide if you want to keep moving forward.
2. *Achieve consensus on goals for all partners.* Develop a program or solution that meets all partners’ needs. Truly collaborative partnerships require extensive planning and understanding regarding each other’s needs and desired outcomes. Know what all partners need in order to report “success.”
3. *Measure, demonstrate and share results.* Partners will also want and need to show that their work (and in this case, shared work) makes a difference for youth and for communities. Involve partners in evaluation planning from the beginning, and seek out joint-venues to disseminate program successes (see also [4-H Science Program Design](#)).

### ***Sustainable partnerships promote and recognize all partners.***

1. *Coordinate efforts to publicize programs.* It is important for the partnering organizations to discuss and clarify which organization is publicizing the sessions, what types of graphics or photos will be used, what “copy” or text will be used, and if efforts of both organizations are needed. It may work best if 4-H supplies the copy or text to be used to describe the program (including graphics or photos), while the partnering agency supplies other information regarding dates/time/locations, etc. It is ideal if 4-H can review the final copy before it is released to the public.
2. *Identify up front how 4-H is to be recognized in the program.* It is important that youth program participants and their parents know they are participating in 4-H Science programs.
  - Co-brand all program materials with the 4-H Emblem (flyers, enrollment forms, signs, posters, take-home sheets, etc.).
  - Provide youth with t-shirts that include the 4-H Emblem and have them say the pledge before meetings (promotes feelings of belonging).
  - For additional information on co-branding and marketing please see [Marketing and Branding 4-H in Urban Communities](#).
3. *Recognize all program partners.* All program partners are important to success – no contribution is too small to recognize. Use formal and informal methods of recognition as appropriate (e.g., public article, thank you note, formal certificate, invitation to attend special events, etc.).