Adventure Central

Abstract

Adventure Central is a trusted, community-based, positive youth development partnership between 4-H, Ohio State University Extension, the University of Dayton and Five Rivers MetroParks. Adventure Central has served at-risk youth and their parents in the West Dayton community for over 10 years. With the aid of the natural world, staff nurture families in life-changing activities that strengthen values, build lasting life skills, and empower youth to explore life’s possibilities. A high intensity, long duration and high frequency programming approach is used, and the primary delivery modes include afterschool, day camp, and teen programs. Parent and family engagement is a high priority. The program includes leader- and learner-directed opportunities for youth to engage with and experience the natural world. A special feature of Adventure Central is that the center is physically located within a 60-acre urban park. Partnerships with local institutions and organizations provide resources to the program in the form of AmeriCorps members, student service learners, and other programmatic support. Applied research and evaluation efforts indicate that Adventure Central has been very successful in creating a high quality, positive youth development environment, and that youth and their families have developed a greater connection with nature.

Program Needs

The needs assessment process included gathering national program examples; talking with staff from both partner agencies (Ohio State Extension and Five Rivers MetroParks); collecting local demographics, existing data, and reports; and conducting focus groups and interviews with key stakeholders in the community (e.g. residents, community leaders, and local government officials). Data were collected locally in 1998 from over 40 representatives from the community, social service agencies, and youth-serving agencies, with a focus on understanding what neighborhood children needed most. Representatives consistently indicated that positive afterschool and summer opportunities were insufficient to meet the needs of urban youth, that youth in the target neighborhoods were underserved, and that youth developmental needs were not being met (e.g., for developing self-esteem and having positive role models) (Modic & McNeely, 1998).

The team concluded that a program providing hands-on environmental education experiences, and sustained contact with nature, other children, and positive adult role models would fill an unmet need in the community. This approach would also capitalize on the strengths of both partners, and meet their organizational needs to achieve high levels of engagement with an underserved audience. The products that resulted from the community needs assessment and data collection process included a mission statement, goals, and a program plan. Afterschool and summer day camp programs were initiated as the primary programmatic thrust in 2000-2001. Plans are reviewed annually to determine continued program focus and direction.
Targeted Audience

The population of the West Dayton community is 94% African-American with a median annual income of just over $22,000. Over 34% of residents live below the poverty line. In 2010, Adventure Central engaged over 210 urban Dayton youth ages 5 to 18, and over 90 parents/guardians in programming totaling over 57,000 contact hours. Ninety-nine percent of program participants identified themselves as African-American, and 80% qualified for free or reduced-price meals. Ninety percent of participants were in the 1st through 7th grades.

Program Goals and Objectives

1. Youth and their families will have opportunities for positive development.

   **Process Objectives**
   
   - Programming will be high duration, high frequency and high intensity as measured by participation numbers, contact hours, and program calendar.
   
   - Youth and parents will report that program learning activities are fun and engaging with a focus on nature, science, literacy, healthy lifestyles and computer technology.
   
   - Youth will report that a variety of service-learning, volunteer and programmatic opportunities are offered to teens and adults.
   
   - Youth will report positive relationships with program adults.

   **Outcome Objectives**
   
   - Parents will report that their children have made gains socially and academically through program participation.
   
   - Youth will report they gained life skills through program participation as reported by older youth through focus groups.

2. Youth and their families will develop a greater connection to nature.

   **Outcome Objective**
   
   - Youth and their families will report improved attitudes towards their connection with nature because of program participation.

Program Design/Curricula and Materials

The Adventure Central program plan is developed annually, and serves as a curriculum to guide the program for the upcoming academic year. The program plan includes monthly themes, objectives, tactics, and recommended curricula, as well as resources for specific topics. From the program plan, the group leaders develop lesson plans for each day and week, with approval of program leadership prior to implementation (see *Adventure Central Program Plan A* and *Program Plan B* for examples). Facilitator-directed curriculum from 4-H such as *Acres of Adventures, Go Plants, and Jr. Master Gardener*, or other hands-on, experiential groups such as *Project’s WET, WILD and Learning Tree* are the primary sources for the program. Most activities come from one of
these research-based curricula, and all activities adhere to the 4-H philosophy of hands on “learning by doing.” Sections for parent engagement special events, service learning and staff development efforts are included as part of the program plan and integrated into the afterschool plans. Episodic, teen, and college service learners make up a large contingent of the Adventure Central volunteer corps. Because of this, a How-to Guide for Supporting Episodic Volunteers was created to help organize and support similar efforts at Adventure Central. The guide as well as the aforementioned program plan can be accessed at: http://www.metroparks.org/Parks/WesleyanAdventure/AC_pubs.aspx.

Knowledge and Research Base

Adventure Central preprogramming is guided by a framework that incorporates the features of positive developmental settings (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; National 4-H Impact Assessment, 2001); essential elements (Kress, 2006); and the six Cs – competence, confidence, character, caring, connection and contribution (Lerner, 2006; Lerner et al., 2005). Adventure Central integrates high touch with opportunities to connect with nature. The result: Participants gain strengthened values, lasting life skills, and both an eagerness and confidence to explore life’s possibilities and the natural world. Furthermore, Adventure Central serves as a demonstration plot, a model of outreach for the twenty-first century land-grant institution (Cochran, Arnett, & Ferrari, 2007).

Youth enrolled in Adventure Central are expected to maintain consistent attendance (four days a week throughout the school year and summer). This intentional focus on high-contact programming is supported by the current body of research, which indicates that youth obtain developmental benefits from consistent participation in well-run, quality youth programs (e.g., Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Little & Harris, 2003; Hansen & Larson, 2007; Little, Wimer, & Weiss, 2008; Scott-Little, Hamann, & Jurs, 2002; Vandell et al., 2006). Through such programs, youth are able to meet needs for belonging, connection, independence, and mastery (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Kress, 2006).

Parent and family engagement is another intentional hallmark of the Adventure Central afterschool program, based on the belief that parents are the primary influence in a child’s life. Research-based recommendations suggest that parental involvement is key to children’s academic achievement and overall healthy development (Epstein, 1991; Fan & Chen, 2001; Gettenger & Guetschow, 1998; Hara & Burke, 1998; Jeynes, 2005), Adventure Central has dedicated a full-time staff position to building and maintaining ongoing relationships with participants’ parents and families. This is done through both informal contact (opportunities to share information or provide feedback on youth behavior), and through formal programming (family fun nights, parent orientations, and parent education classes).

Adventure Central provides youth with both structured and unstructured opportunities to connect with nature, in an effort to reduce the occurrence and prevalence of nature deficit disorder, a condition produced by insufficient time in the outdoors and resulting in a wide range of behavior problems (Louv, 2005). Youth engage with nature through learner-directed inquiry activities and spend at least one hour each day in free play in a safe, accessible natural area. These experiences strongly influence childhood development, and offer children irreplaceable opportunities for exploring and discovering, for creating and developing their personalities and identities, and for probing and testing the margins of their world (Chawla, 2007; Kellert, 2005).

Finally, Adventure Central represents a model for outreach for the 21st century land-grant institution. In the words of the 2000 Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities, it is a “conscious ef-
fort to bring the resources and expertise at our institutions to bear on the community” (p. 10). The partnership created between field staff and campus-based extension support keeps the program grounded in the community through the day-to-day conduct of educational programming, while also approaching the work in a scholarly manner. Now in its tenth year of operation, the practical needs of the program have driven the applied research agenda in which the scholarship leads to use of best practices and contributions to the knowledge base. While individual elements contribute to its success, Adventure Central derives its strength from the comprehensive nature of the program. Furthermore, this model of engagement can be replicated (Cochran et al., 2007).

**Partners**

Adventure Central is a complex and dynamic partnership between The Ohio State University Extension, 4-H, and Five Rivers MetroParks. These organizations provide the facility, operating budget, and base personnel to conduct the Adventure Central program. State program specialists through OSU Extension have also been utilized in program design and evaluation.

A partnership with Notre Dame Mission Volunteers AmeriCorps has led to three full-time staff members on 11-month terms. The University of Dayton has been a tremendous local partner with collaborations leading to over 260 service learners, who have contributed 12,700 service hours since 2003 many of which we science students through courses or service groups, one to two Semester of Service AmeriCorps members providing full-time service each semester, as well as an Ohio Campus Compact AmeriCorps VISTA that was co-housed between the University of Dayton and Adventure Central for five years and charged with conducting an afterschool program at Fairview Elementary.

Adventure Central also works with the Ohio Department of Education to provide meals to youth in the program, and with local partners like Montgomery County Public Health, Five Rivers MetroParks Ranger Division, and the Montgomery County Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) for educational health and safety programs.

**Funding**

This positive youth development initiative, focused on science, nature, and healthy lifestyles was made possible through funding from Five Rivers MetroParks, OSU Extension, Ohio 4-H Foundation, University of Dayton, Ohio Department of Education and other grants and contracts. The annual operating budget is roughly $700,000 inclusive of operating the program, facility, and staffing.

**Staffing**

The program team includes 11 staff from OSU Extension (2 educators, 3 program assistants), Five Rivers MetroParks (administrative assistant, 2 apprentices), Notre Dame Mission Volunteers AmeriCorps (3), and the University of Dayton Semester of Service AmeriCorps (1-2). Additionally up to eight teens are hired during the summer as part of the JET program, with up to another 16 teens filling volunteer roles with the program. Four park and maintenance personnel complete the staff.

**Program Delivery**

Adventure Central’s program utilizes a variety of delivery methods to achieve its goals to include youth-selected activities, leader-directed activities, and parent/family engagement. All program efforts attempt to utilize the
outdoor environment in the 60-acre Wesleyan MetroPark where Adventure Central is housed, in order to enhance learning with a goal of youth being outside at least one hour each day. Parents are engaged informally, but intentionally, as special activities are planned at least quarterly at the facility or at a partner site to continue to build relationships and support between program staff and parents.

**Afterschool Program.** The afterschool program operates from September through May with programming offered Monday-Thursday from 1:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. Youth voice and choice is a priority of the program, and to this end, each day from 1:30 to 4:30 p.m. youth have a choice about the activities they wish to participate in, to include homework assistance, outdoor play and games, computer lab, or indoor games and activities. At 4:30 p.m., youth are divided into five groups by developmental age (younger to older) and eat a meal together. From 5:00-6:30 p.m. youth work in their groups through structured leader-directed learning activities according to the monthly theme, objectives, and tactics. An annual science fair is held as part of a monthly theme during the afterschool program.

**Day Camp.** The Day Camp operates June and July with programming offered Monday-Thursday from 7:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Structured, leader-directed activities occur from 10:00 a.m. until 2:30 p.m. and include activities around weekly themes, utilizing the park, and include field trips to other Five Rivers MetroParks facilities or local learning destinations. A program goal is to have youth spend at least ½ of their time outside daily.

**Job Experience and Training (JET) Program.** The JET Program spans February to August with the focus on developing 21st century skills in teens through parks-related careers and providing a service to the public. Annual participation ranges between 20-25 teens. Teens deliver 30 hours of service weekly over an eight week period, some in paid positions and others as volunteers at one of six Five Rivers MetroParks facilities.

**Recognition of Participants**

Teens in the JET program receive compensation or a gift card as recognition following the completion of their service. Youth participating in the science fair are recognized for their efforts at a showcase event at the end of the experience to include judging and oral presentation. Youth are also recognized for their efforts in the bi-monthly newsletter. Special programs have also been implemented over periods of time where youth are recognized as “AC Achievers” by and in front of their peers for being positive examples of the program expectations. Individual certificates have also been presented annually for each program participant, in recognition of one outstanding trait or aspect of that individual. Youth are encouraged to bring in certificates, trophies, report cards, honor roll letters, and so forth, so they can be recognized by staff.

**Program Evaluation and Outcomes/Impact**

Adventure Central has conducted multiple evaluations over the initial 10 years of programming with two that are particularly relevant. Evaluation of parental perceptions of family involvement and youth outcomes for Adventure Central programs (Ferrari et al., 2006) includes the following:

1. A survey completed by parents that includes questions on educational support practices, barriers to participation, parents interest in education and family focused activities, climate and support from Adventure Central, and perception of youth outcomes.

2. Focus groups with parents conducted with questions designed to elicit parents’ thoughts regarding their own
and their child’s experience at Adventure Central, and their suggestions regarding future family programming.

Evaluation of youth outcomes of long-term participation in Adventure Central programs (Ferrari, Lekies, & Arnett, 2009) included focus groups with participants aged 12-16 who participated three or more years to learn about the outcomes of long-term participation. Questions addressed how teens’ participation had helped them, attitudes and skills they acquired, opportunities afforded to them, and their insight into program features that captured their interest and engaged them in sustained participation.

**Process Evaluation**

In a study on long-term participation, youth provided feedback on the types of opportunities they felt had the greatest impact on their continued participation in programming, as well as their growth and development. Implementation of features shared by youth included sustained and enhanced opportunities for older youth to provide service, participate in work-based learning, and take on increasing levels of responsibility for programming, specifically with the overnight camp experience. Youth also indicated that existing programming philosophy was reaching the desired outcomes, especially in regards to youth connecting with nature. Therefore, the program took action to make sure to build from the efforts underway for stability and consistency while seeking new enhancements to add value to the core program.

Great attention has been spent by program staff to continually assess the environmental factors related to successful afterschool outcomes and make adjustments as appropriate. The long-term participation study, as well as previous research at Adventure Central has documented the existence of positive youth-staff relationships (Paisley & Ferrari, 2005), a sense of belonging (Ferrari et al., 2006; Ferrari & Turner, 2006), and mastery of skills (Ferrari, Arnett, & Cochran, 2008), demonstrating that the essential elements are present to facilitate learning and development.

**Outcome Evaluation**

In a long-term participation study it was found that youth participants of three or more years in the Adventure Central afterschool program experienced a wide range of opportunities throughout their years of participation. They spoke positively of their experiences, of the ways they had grown personally, and of their relationships with peers and staff. They learned new skills that helped them as they were growing up, and also recognized the ways in which participation could benefit them in the future. Youth felt these skills were helping them in other settings, and they were able to articulate how skills learned at Adventure Central had helped them at home and school. The youth in this study were able to articulate clearly not only how they benefited from their participation, but also what specific program aspects were meaningful to them. The study shows that Adventure Central has affected participants’ lives in positive ways, such as having new opportunities they wouldn’t have had otherwise (Ferrari et al., 2009).

Through long-term participation, youth reported changing attitudes about nature, in particular being more comfortable in nature and having greater respect for trees and habitat. They attributed these changes to the regular and direct experience with nature through the program, their work and volunteer experiences, having fun outside, and overcoming their fears about the natural world (Ferrari et al., 2009).

As part of an evaluation of parental perceptions of family involvement and youth outcomes, the vast majority
of parents \(n=64\) indicated that their child experienced a variety of educational and social benefits due to their participation in the program. More than two-thirds agreed or strongly agreed that their child improved since coming to Adventure Central. Improvements in social skills and school performance were mentioned most often (Ferrari et al., 2006).

**Evidence of Sustainability**

The Adventure Central afterschool program is one of the core programs operated by Adventure Central and was the primary reason for the program’s creation. The partnership began with a 10-year agreement in 1998 between Five Rivers MetroParks, Ohio State University Extension and 4-H, which was enthusiastically renewed in 2007 through 2016, thus providing base operating funds for that timeframe. The program has consistently brought in $100,000 or more annually from external funds over the past 10 years. Program staff has grown from five staff originally to 13 team members currently. Annually, over 120 volunteers contribute at least 12,000 hours of service to Adventure Central.

**Awards or other Recognition Received for Program**

**Overall Recognition**

- National Association of Extension 4-H Agents (NAE4HA) Susan Barkman Scholarship for Research – Awarded to Theresa Ferrari, Kristi Lekies and Nate Arnett in 2007 for their research proposal regarding outcomes of long-term participation.
- Adventure Central was selected to appear in the National Association of Extension 4-H Agents’ Directory of Urban Programs. The profile is found at the following website under the “Personal Development” category: [http://www.colorado4h.org/urbanprogram/](http://www.colorado4h.org/urbanprogram/).

**Adventure Central Afterschool Program**


**Job Experience and Training National Awards**

- Dr. Duncan Program of Distinction Award for North Central Region NAE4HA
- METLife Excellence in 4-H Afterschool Award for 4-H Programs of Distinction Adventure Central’s JET
Considerations for Replication

While Adventure Central is a complex partnership that derives its strength from being facility based and managed, many aspects of the program have been replicated, and guides and plans were developed to aid others in replication efforts.

Since 2006, components of the Adventure Central afterschool program have been replicated as part of an outreach program at Fairview Elementary School. Fairview Elementary is a Dayton Public School Neighborhood School Center, and Adventure Central was sought out as a local partner to provide afterschool services by both the University of Dayton, who is guiding the community process, and the school administration. The program was led by a Campus Compact AmeriCorps VISTA under the training and direction of Adventure Central professionals.

Adventure Central was created as a model program and has had a number of professionals from other countries (Taiwan, Ireland, Armenia, Georgia, and Uzbekistan) and states (West Virginia and Indiana) visit to observe and learn about the methods and process utilized at Adventure Central. The curriculum was also used for teaching 62 4-H professionals and afterschool community partners who attended a statewide in-service training in spring 2005. Programs initiated from this training are still being implemented today.

Adventure Central has been recognized as a leader in helping to reconnect youth and nature. Through the after-school program youth have daily high quality experiences with the natural world and this model is gaining attention. Nate Arnett, Director, was one of 30 professionals selected in 2009 by National 4-H to participate in a think tank on reconnecting youth and nature. Collaborations with Dayton Public School Neighborhood School Centers have led to improved environments on the school grounds and better utilization of their grounds for instruction and exploration.

The Adventure Central Program Plan and How-to Guide for Supporting Episodic Volunteers are two examples of resources that are written with practical application and program replication in mind.

References


Lerner, R. M. (2006, October). The study of positive youth development: Implications of developmental change across grades 5, 6, and 7. General session presented at the National Association of Extension 4-H Agents, Milwaukee, WI.


**In Partnership With**

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