

Recruiting and Retaining Youth in Programs

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Young people are typically recruited for programs through strategies such as flyers, announcements, or word of mouth. While these strategies have proven to be successful, they may not be enough. Several recent articles have presented other strategies that can be used in the recruitment process.

- Offer programs not already available in the area and match scheduling to participants' needs.
- Communicate the message to youth and their families that involvement will likely aid in a brighter future for youth by developing life and workforce skills.
- Directly reach out to youth and their families by making telephone calls or visiting school and community activities.
- Recruit peer circles. Youth report that they are more likely to participate in programs if their friends participate.
- Make an effort to recruit at-risk youth (Lauver & Little, 2005).

Recruitment is only part of the equation. Program recruiters may have been successful in getting youth enrolled in programs, but the key is now retaining long-term participation. Below are some recommended strategies.

- Hire and/or recruit program staff or volunteers who understand the importance of developing positive relationships with youth. In addition, recruit adults who effectively manage programs by beginning on time, including all youth in activities, presenting material clearly, and handling negative behavior (Lauver & Little, 2005; Walker & Arbreton, 2005).
- Balance academic activities with recreational activities. Youth in out-of-school time programs do not want to feel as though they are in a program that is an extension of the school day. It is important to create a balance between homework assistance and fun activities. Youth can be actively engaged in recreational activities where youth learn skills and subject matter (Lauver & Little, 2005; Walker & Arbreton, 2005).
- Provide opportunities for youth that are interesting and relevant to what they want to learn (Anderson-Butcher, 2005).
- Offer challenging, age-appropriate program activities and freedom in choosing activities (Little & Lauver, 2005).
- Give youth meaningful roles in leadership, community service, and paid employment. This will allow them to feel a sense of responsibility and ownership (Anderson-Butcher, 2005; Lauver & Little, 2005; Little & Lauver, 2005).
- Communicate to youth and parents that attendance is important to benefit from the program, but set realistic attendance goals.
- Consider the level of need, age, and interest when setting attendance goals. Often, older youth have more demands on their time that keep them from committing as much time to a program as desired by them or the program organizers (Lauver & Little, 2005).

- Present incentives for participation (Lauver & Little, 2005).
- Design programs so that parents can be actively engaged (Borden, Perkins, Villarruel, & Stone, 2005).

Overall, program quality is critical for recruitment and retention in youth programs. Design programs with best practices in mind. In other words, use the eight key elements of youth development as a framework when designing programs. A copy of this article with references may be found at www.ohio4h.org/tferrari/publications2005.html.

References

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