

2007 Sauder-Funded Work-Based Learning Programs (Gardening Focus)

Program Descriptions

Friends Care Garden – Greene County Extension, Yellow Springs, OH

Friends Care Garden is an intergenerational garden at a nursing home facility in Yellow Springs, Ohio. The nursing home has a permanent, on-going 1/8 acre garden and greenhouse on its premises. The garden provided twelve middle and high school youth aged 12-17 an opportunity to learn workforce preparation skills in an experiential hands-on setting. It incorporated intergenerational interaction among youth, senior citizens and adult garden mentors as well as a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program. Youth participated over a five-month period from April through early September, attending one day per week in April and May and two days per week beginning in June. Tasks included planting, maintaining the garden, harvesting, packaging produce together with the elders, and delivering produce to CSA customers. Two adult coordinators provided supervision. In addition, the youth participated in several garden-based community service projects. Youth received up to \$250 for participation in the program, which they received through biweekly paychecks.

City Beets – Adventure Central and Wegerzyn Gardens MetroPark, Dayton, OH

The City Beets program brought together 15 urban and suburban youth age 12-16 from Montgomery County to explore agriculture and learn the skills needed to achieve success in the working world. Throughout the eight week summer program, City Beets teens cultivated over 3,000 ft² of garden area and harvested 12 different types of produce to sell at the 2nd Street Public Market; they also donated 14 pounds of produce to a local food bank. Work and learning sessions were held twice a week during the program with learning sessions focusing on food preparation, conflict resolution, and leadership development. A special program ending trip to one of Heifer International's Global Villages helped participants learn about global food systems. Youth received \$200 in gift cards for their participation in the program.

Evaluation

Using a retrospective post-then-pre design, youth answered survey questions about their abilities in 25 workforce skill areas including decision-making, problem solving, communication, teamwork, motivation, leadership, and work habits, and in 15 gardening skill areas such as planting and maintaining a garden, plant identification, pest control, using tools and equipment, composting, organic and non-organic techniques, and harvesting produce. They also answered questions regarding food systems knowledge, future interests in gardening, and interest in careers related to gardening and nature. In addition, youth and their supervisors completed workforce skill assessments. Interviews with program leaders focused on program activities, impacts, and useful strategies.

Key Findings

Workforce Skills

- Youth reported significant improvements in their abilities in 25% of the skills examined.
- Areas of significant gain were: Communication skills (oral and written), Leadership (organizing people), and Professionalism/Work Ethic (initiative, goal setting, motivation, and meeting deadlines).
- Staff identified increases in leadership and teamwork skills.
- At Friends Care, the staff indicated that youth increased their comfort level in working with elders.

Gardening Skills

- Both programs documented significant gains in gardening skills in almost every area studied.

Food Systems Knowledge

- Youth reported increasing their knowledge of food systems, Community Supported Agriculture, how to grow and prepare food, farmers' markets, and the difference between organic and conventional food.
- Staff indicated a greater willingness of youth to try new foods and a greater understanding of different types and varieties of produce.

Future Interests

- 17 out of 21 participants (81%) indicated that they would like to do more gardening in the future and are aware of careers related to parks, plants, and natural resources.
- 1/3 of program participants indicated a personal interest in seeking a career in parks, plants, and natural resources.

Successful Strategies

- Both sites identified having clear structure and expectations as important.
- Teamwork activities helped in the successful completion of garden tasks.
- Positive youth-adult relationships contributed to the success of the programs.
- Friends Care Garden staff reported that youth responded very positively to the work-based learning concept, taking their responsibility much more seriously than in years past when this framework was not used. It increased ownership of the program.
- Stipends were beneficial in encouraging responsibility and helping make the experience be more like a real job; Friends Care staff indicated the use of time cards and biweekly paychecks were important.
- City Beets staff felt the opportunity to demonstrate skills, knowledge, and leadership abilities at the farmers' market contributed to learning and was a highly beneficial activity.
- The size and scope of the programs were adequate for the number of staff available.

Summary and Recommendations for Future Work-Based Learning Programs

The work-based gardening programs were effective in teaching gardening skills and a number of workforce skills. The fewer identified gains in workforce skills may be due to the small sample size, the questions asked, the methodology used, and/or the short timeframe of the program (8 weeks for some). The youth could have assessed their skills as high coming into the program and therefore little gain was reported (youth reported scores of 3 or more on a 4-point scale for almost all pre indicators and over 3 on all post indicators). In addition, workforce skills take longer to develop and therefore may not show significant gains in this brief timeframe. Furthermore, with the focus on successfully growing produce, the programs may have not targeted the workforce skills as specifically as the gardening skills.

Even though many of the participants (76%) had prior gardening experience, this was the first formal and intense experience they had and hence could be part of the reason for the significant gains in gardening skills. The work also involved a "real" business—expecting a "real" product for sale or delivery to customers—and the program emphasized completing the necessary gardening tasks for this purpose. Increases in gardening skills also may be easier for youth to identify than workforce skills; participants can see concrete improvements in results based on practice. (i.e., if you weed the garden then desired plants will yield more).

Overall, the youth and the staff felt this was a worthwhile experience. The majority of youth expressed an interest in future gardening activities.

Recommendations:

- **Selection of participants is key** to the success of the program. The more planned and structured the program is prior to recruitment, the better potential to connect with the right participants and to set them up for success throughout the program.
- The **age of 12-17** works well for work-based learning programs. Youth are becoming old enough to grasp the abstract workforce skills and concrete technical skills but also have youthful enthusiasm to do the work.
- Having a **real, concrete service or product** can help youth to stay focused, complete necessary tasks, develop responsibility, see the results of their work, and take ownership in the garden.
- **“Growing your own”** is recommended as a practice of working with past program participants in the same or similar program to build on the foundation of skill sets laid from previous programs. This is especially important if positive gains in workforce skills are expected. New strategies such as time cards and stipends can help make participation seem more like a real job.
- **Structure and clear expectations** are needed to help youth understand what is expected of them and to successfully complete required tasks and activities.
- Programs should incorporate **opportunities for youth to demonstrate skills, knowledge, and leadership, as well as other ways for youth to develop a sense of ownership in the garden.**
- While the focus is on tasks needed for successful gardening, **activities should be incorporated that clearly contribute to the development of decision-making, problem solving, teamwork, leadership, communications, and other workforce skills.** Youth leadership opportunities, written journals, presentation opportunities, and special activities to cultivate teamwork and other skills should be considered.
- **Frequent opportunities for processing and reflection** should be included so youth can better identify the types of things they are learning and the areas in which they need improvement. Self- and supervisor assessments completed at the end of the program can be helpful in identifying strengths and weaknesses.
- **Supportive adult leaders and mentors** (and peers if possible) are essential in creating a positive learning environment for youth.
- Work-based learning programs need to consider the **duration and frequency** of the program and be realistic about the gains that can be made within those constraints. Technical skills will most likely be developed first with workforce skills being developed within the context of the technical work. **The longer the duration of the program and greater the frequency of contact the better the opportunity to show positive gains in workforce skills.** Funders need to be prepared to look at a longer window of support as it may take two or more years to show big impacts.
- Youth should be provided with **appropriate recognition or reward** for their efforts. Monetary or other stipends connected to the amount of work completed are beneficial in helping youth to take ownership and responsibility, as well as to make the experience more like a real work experience.
- The **size and scope** of gardening programs should be appropriate for the amount of staff involved.
- **Evaluation activities** documenting skills and knowledge before and after participation in the programs will help identify impacts of the program and areas in need of improvement. Beneficial strategies, challenges, and lessons learned will be helpful as well.

For more information about work-based learning programs, please access the Action Brief on Work-Based Learning Programs at <http://www.ohio4h.org/workforceprep/>