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Public and private agencies have invested billions of dollars in the past twenty years on a wide range of programs designed to help young people deemed to be "at-risk," such as dropouts, potential dropouts, and teenage mothers. The range of efforts includes the

federally funded Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) youth programs, mentoring, storefront learning centers, academically enriched summer programs, and special foundation initiatives.

Federal agencies and foundations have invested additional millions in research to evaluate these programs. Trying to understand why some program sites succeed while others providing the same services do not, researchers and policymakers debate (1) whether the right audience is served; (2) whether to make incremental improvements or radical changes in program design; and (3) whether data about program effectiveness were gathered or interpreted properly. This focus ignores how the programs are managed.

Because neither researchers nor policymakers pay sufficient attention to program management, youth programs remain largely paraprofessional, ad hoc enterprises, given, of necessity, to improvisation rather than stability and maturity. More often than not, local programs fail to reflect current knowledge of effective practices, and well-designed programs are undermined by faulty implementation. If researchers paid more attention to program management, much more could be learned about why programs succeed or fail.

WHAT IS EXAMINED IN YOUTH PROGRAM RESEARCH?

Youth programs are usually described in terms of the target groups served, the sponsoring entity, or the type of primary service delivered. While these descriptions are necessary and useful, they do not evoke the inner workings of the programs. Most youth programs are, first and foremost, service organizations. They are labor-intensive and require financing, marketing, staffing, and management control. Their services are delivered by counselors, job developers, instructors, and case managers. This is the system the client understands and interacts with; to the client, this is the program. The differences between successful and unsuccessful programs can be quickly traced to the variable capacity of the programs to deliver their services. If these differences are ignored, evaluators, policymakers, and funders are in danger of ascribing success or failure to the wrong set of factors.

Researchers have not entirely overlooked management issues, but they are typically subordinated to evaluative overall program effects. In multi-site demonstrations, policy implications are drawn from the combined results of all the sites. Yet if one site is dramatically better or worse than the others, the results are skewed. For example, in Baltimore's RAISE mentoring program, only three of the seven sites had positive gains, but those three were so successful that they accounted for the overall positive results in the evaluation (McPartland & Nettles, 1991).

AN EFFECTIVE SERVICE VISION

The information presented below is drawn from evaluations of several youth programs operating currently. It is organized around four elements that are considered to be essential for quality program management: (1) a well-managed service delivery system, (2) effective targeting and recruiting, (3) a well-articulated and consistent identity, and (4) sound leadership and an effective staff.

1. Service Delivery. Most research on youth programs tries to determine "what works best" by comparing various services, such as basic skills instruction, job placement, and occupational training. Although this research demonstrates that some programs are effective, it is possible (and likely) that successful programs simply had more able staff and a better-run organization than other programs. Researchers are beginning to study how service is "delivered" to clients and how that delivery is organized, staffed, and managed. If the service delivery system fails, the program suffers, no matter how good the program design.

2. Targeting and Recruiting. Even in the best of circumstances, targeting and recruiting young people into programs is not easy. Since agencies have few resources to devote to administrative functions, these tasks are frequently carried out by the most poorly paid and least experienced of program staff. The long-run results are detrimental; once a program loses its reputation in a community, it can take years to regain the confidence of potential young clients.

Although many people are trying to understand why some programs have recruiting difficulties, most research concentrates on program designs rather than on recruitment, outreach, selection processes, assessment, and intake practices. Without more and better research on these critical management tasks, policymakers have a painfully limited number of choices regarding programs with recruitment problems: cut programs until there is more demand, or force people into programs through Learnfare and Workfare schemes.

It would help program managers if research would point to recruitment and targeting strategies that work best. A few studies have begun to look systematically at these strategies; one found that direct outreach is highly effective, and that streamlined enrollment and assessment procedures were helpful (Feldman, 1988). But the glue that holds the entire targeting and recruitment effort together is the skill and motivation of program staff (Public/Private Ventures, 1988).

3. A Consistent Program Mission and Identity. Generally, youth organizations fail to articulate their mission or identity fully or clearly. But every organization has an identity, shaped by how it approaches its clients. This unique approach is called the "service concept."

The service concept is communicated by the way the program delivers its services. A heavy dose of self-paced individualized instruction says one thing about a program's service concept; a series of experiential group and empowerment activities sends another message. "Little things"--such as the style of counseling, the way the phone is answered, and even the physical layout--either reinforce or contradict the concept. The program evaluation literature does not study these elements independently.

4. Leadership and Staffing. Far more than is usually acknowledged, an effective staff accounts for good program performance. Staffing is given "lip service" in the literature, but training the nation's trainers rarely appears high on anyone's list of policy implications or program improvements. Attention remains riveted on program design issues, largely ignoring the people who make the designs work or fail.

Meanwhile, the challenges faced by practitioners are growing, not only in terms of the multiple problems of at-risk youth. The funding stream almost never allows for long-term, stable staffing. Funders expect services to begin as soon as the grant is made, ignoring the fact that the staff needs to be hired and trained. The pressure managers feel to "hit the ground running" comes at the expense of quality services to clients. Chronic underfunding and cash flow problems force senior staff to pursue more projects and "soft money," leading to further deterioration of staff functioning and morale.

Sadly, many youth programs are poorly run, an admission made by many senior program managers. Ad-hoc hiring is fairly common in second-chance programs; except for a generic college degree (not always required), staff are typically not required to have significant professional counseling or teaching experience with at-risk youth. This is not surprising in light of the lack of professional standards for most front-line jobs in youth agencies--or even serious discussions of what the qualifications of youth workers should be.

Only one national study has directly addressed these issues--an assessment of personnel practices in JTPA programs (Berkeley Planning Associates, 1990). The study revealed that low salaries and workers' perceptions of a lack of advancement in the field contributed to high turnover. But program managers reported that they preferred to hire more staff than invest in training for existing staff.

An exciting new research literature on public management demonstrates the absolute

centrality of effective leadership. These studies offer convincing evidence that innovation is not the sole domain of charismatic leaders, that the skills necessary to launch successful initiatives can be taught and learned (Levin & Sanger, 1991).

CONCLUSION

The message of this digest--that management factors are central to youth program successes and failures--has largely eluded the youth development field. Unless the field matures and organizes itself, youth programs in the U.S. will continue to flounder, succeeding or failing almost by chance.

Although there is room for optimism, many mistakes of the past have reappeared in new forms. In 1988, community service was the fashion; in 1989, it was mentoring; in 1990, it was apprenticeship. But running these programs is just plain hard; the field cannot absorb new program ideas, and no design will really work, until youth organizations are staffed and managed in a professional, competent manner. When the field takes the training enterprise seriously for itself as well as for its clients, it will be taken seriously by both the public and the clients who need to benefit from it.

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