Using a Camp to Bolster Youth-driven Community Change

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Over the course of three summers, Sierra Health Foundation hosted a weeklong summer youth development camp for REACH coalitions at its Grizzly Creek Ranch retreat facilities in Portola, California. Located 130 miles east of Sacramento, Grizzly Creek Ranch is set in the mountains of Plumas County and encompasses 1,500 acres of forests, streams and meadows; it includes cabins, meeting and dining facilities, open space, a ropes course, a small lake and a staff with experience facilitating team-building and outdoor education activities. Part youth development conference, part community organizing workshop and part traditional summer camp, roughly 20 adults and 70 youth lived, worked and played together in an environment focused on youth development practices and community change strategies.

Evaluation data gathered through interviews and site observations across the coalitions reveals numerous positive references to camp. Perhaps the most telling indication of its value to participants was the effort of REACH coalition coordinators to ensure the continuation of camp for a fourth year—after the REACH program had formally ended and with substantially reduced fiscal and technical assistance support from the foundation.

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That camps can provide meaningful youth development experiences is a view shared by numerous researchers. One team (Thurber, Scanlin, Scheuler, & Henderson, 2007) found that parents, children and camp staff reported significant positive change in social skills, positive identity, physical and thinking skills, and positive values and spirituality as a result of having attended a camp. Others have reached similar conclusions with other measures, including positive self-concept (Groves & Kabalas, 1976; Marsh, Richards, & Barnes, 1986), healthy beliefs about effort and mastery (Treasure & Roberts, 1998) and self-actualization (Cartwright, Tabatabai, Beaudoin, & Naidoo, 2000). Together, these findings corroborate other studies, including those that look at youth populations with identified problems such as family dysfunction and other risk factors (Lewicki, Goyette, & Marr, 1996).

Less is known about whether youth camps can serve as an incubator of skills, ideas and strategies for meaningful youth-driven community change. This issue brief explores this topic. After briefly describing the nature and evolution of REACH camp over three summers, we highlight meaningful outcomes and challenges encountered. We close with two broader recommendations for the field.

REACH Camp participants gained leadership skills and self-confidence on the ropes challenge course at Grizzly Creek Ranch.

Grizzly Creek Camp

Participants and Leadership

Adult coalition coordinators selected approximately 10 youth from their community to attend camp. Most youth participants were in middle and high school. Camp leadership was shared among three distinct groups: Grizzly Creek Ranch staff, members of the REACH technical assistance team and Sierra Health Foundation staff, and adult chaperones from each of the coalitions. The Grizzly Creek Ranch staff provided maintenance, ropes course training and supervision, dining and other administrative support. This group was made up both of full-time staff members who work at the camp year-round and seasonal members (mainly college-aged adults) who work at the camp during the summer months. Adult chaperones helped with transportation to and from camp, stayed with youth in cabins, and in some cases took responsibility for leading workshops.

REACH technical assistance providers provided leadership for most of the camp program, including those parts that related to youth development and community change. During years two and three, the program planning began months in advance and included adult and youth representatives from each coalition. The planning group chose themes for each day of camp and each coalition was responsible for facilitating theme-related activities or workshops.

Goals and Focus

Although the particular emphases changed over the three years of camp, each camp emphasized basic youth development and youth engagement topics, along with efforts to develop adult and youth capacity to promote community change. Along with imparting new knowledge and skills, camp sought to build relationships, both within and among the different community coalitions. Finally, camp provided a fun, though challenging, setting outside of the participants' normal environment. For some youth participants it was one of their first significant experiences outside of their immediate community.

Activities

Camp activities included meals, workshop sessions, ropes course and free-time activities. The latter included swimming, canoeing, fishing, archery, arts and crafts, volleyball and basketball. Each night a large group activity was scheduled, such as a bonfire, talent show and night hike. A "closing circle" concluded each day with announcements and reflections on the day.

Some activities involved the entire group, others the coalition groups, and others mixed groups with adults and youth from different communities. For example, the youth were separated into cabins by gender and age, but mixed with youth from different coalitions. This reflected the belief of camp planners that an important component was the opportunity to get to know youth from other communities.

What Worked Well

REACH camp provided an environment for adult and youth participants to get away, be tested in unfamiliar settings, meet new people and strengthen existing relationships. Overall, the camp experience contributed significantly to key REACH goals by:

- building meaningful adult-youth relationships;
- fostering meaningful relationships between youth within the same coalition and across coalitions;
- developing new skills, leadership abilities and self-confidence;
- cultivating a culture of youth engagement and youth as assets;
- modeling and observing youth development practices in action; and
- recruiting new youth into coalitions and strengthening youth investment in coalition goals and strategies.

More information on how participants valued the REACH camp is available in a video produced to document the year-three camp (online at www.sierrahealth.org).

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Many aspects of camp proved challenging and significant learning took place over the three years. Some of these challenges might be similar to those facing any youth camp, while others are particular to the specific REACH goal of using camp to bolster youth-driven community change. Among the most important lessons learned are the following.

Bringing Camp Home

Adults and youth struggled to translate community change plans, strategies and practices formed at REACH camp to their coalition communities. There are at least two key reasons for this. First, not all youth and adult coalition members could take part in camp, so a partial mismatch existed between those who provided input at camp and those engaged in the day-to-day running of coalitions. Second, for some youth the camp was their first introduction to REACH and to the work of their coalition. This was especially true during the first year, as many of the youth were not yet familiar with the adult members of their community coalitions.

To support the goal of developing a bridge between coalition planning that took place at camp and the subsequent work of the coalitions, technical assistance providers organized a post-camp meeting at the foundation so that youth and adults could continue to refine their community plans. Later, there were also site-based meetings to support implementation of the plans.

One successful strategy was to immediately capitalize on the energy and enthusiasm generated at camp. Galt youth came home and got themselves on the agenda to present their ideas at the next school board meeting.

Dealing with Socio-cultural Differences

Camp brought together youth and adults from communities with distinct demographic and socioeconomic profiles. Learning to engage across cultural, linguistic and socioeconomic differences was a new and sometimes challenging experience for many participants. It also represented one of the major possibilities for learning that a youth camp can provide. Camp planners should anticipate difficulties and be prepared with processes to mediate conflicts and reflect on the various emotions generated.

In particular, there needs to be careful planning concerning the needs of vulnerable youth populations. These vulnerable youth are disproportionately economically poor, youth of color, immigrant youth, LGBT youth and/or youth who have sustained experience with foster care, homelessness or the juvenile justice system. Camp is a powerful experience in part because youth are away from their homes and communities. Camp magnifies the challenges some communities face in providing safe and supportive environments for development. Some youth might find the experience of camp—living among youth they are unfamiliar with, talking about tough conditions in their communities, dealing with class and racial differences—difficult.

Balancing Youth and Adult Leadership

The youth-centered emphasis on engaging youth in the process of developing and presenting the workshops (during years two and three) marked a shift from the first year. For example, two youth from West Sacramento were selected to be co-facilitators with camp coordinators from the REACH technical assistance team. They helped to lead and facilitate workshops. Youth seemed to enjoy sharing their experiences about their communities and many led impressive and sophisticated sessions. At times, however, youth were asked to develop workshops on topics and skills with which they had limited or no experience.

The more successful workshops seemed to be those where 1) youth and adults co-presented together, 2) there was a balance of knowledge and experience, and 3) methods for eliciting active participation were employed.

Another tension surfaced was between supervising youth and working with them—when should adults create and enforce the "rules" and when should the youth do this? For example, camp organizers deliberately split up youth from coalitions into different cabin groups. This conflicted with the desire of youth to be placed with their friends. Camp planners should be prepared to use these conflicts as learning opportunities, for example to reinforce the broader goals and purposes of camp.

Dealing with Age Differences

The diversity of youth present requires that language be accessible, larger contexts explained and motivation be considered. Youth participated in workshops that presented a variety of topics such as: working in youth-adult partnerships, communication, handling conflict, youth-centered event planning and networking. Most youth were engaged during these workshops; however, it became apparent during year one that some of the content was less accessible to younger youth and non-native English speakers. In subsequent years the move to having youth-led workshops helped somewhat with this issue. Another helpful strategy is to spend less time in large groups and more in small groups where there was a greater chance for ensuring that the content was tailored to specific youth. These groups also promoted more active youth participation by contrast with larger, lecture-style sessions.

Clarifying Adult Roles

Among the more important developments of the first year of camp were discussions among coalition adults on their role at camp and how to work with youth in their coalitions. The first year at Grizzly Creek Ranch, the adult chaperones arrived without any orientation and at times were openly frustrated about the lack of clarity of

their roles. There were numerous other adult authority figures for youth to listen to, including the Grizzly Creek Ranch facilities staff, technical assistance providers and ropes course instructors. To address this concern, an adult chaperone orientation to provide clarity about roles and responsibilities was added in years two and three.

Other Year-to-Year Adjustments

Many specific features of camp evolved from year to year. For example, based on feedback received after the first camp, adults and youth were more directly involved in camp planning sessions for the second and third years,
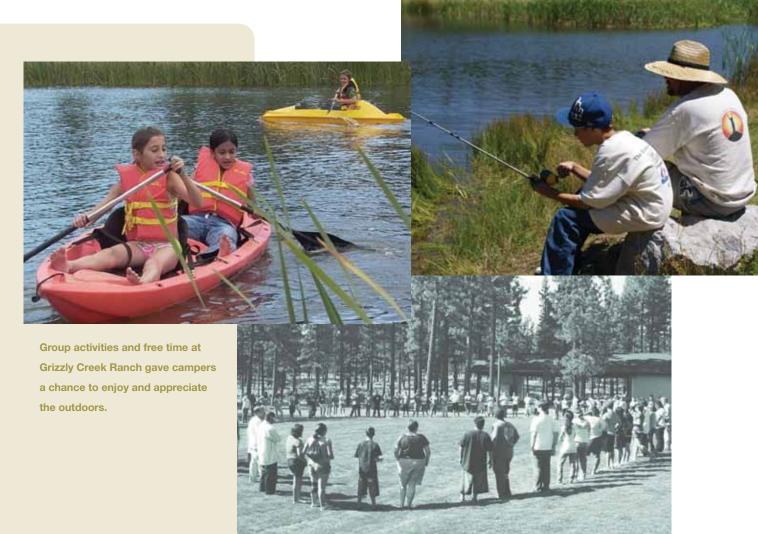

REACH Camp brought together youth and adults with a diverse range of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. The camp provided an environment for participants to meet new people and strengthen existing relationships.

and made significant changes in the structure and focus of camp, including:

- *Camp orientation.* Unlike year one when the orientation was optional, parents and guardians of campers were required to attend an information session prior to camp.

- *More free time for youth.* Daily opportunities for youth to choose their own activities were part of camp in all years, but more time was allowed in later years.

- *Free time for adults.* Camp organizers provided a break room for adults.

- *More time to work in coalitions.* Coalition youth and adults facilitated workshops and planned community projects together. For example, during year two each coalition was responsible for planning, coordinating and facilitating activities for part of a day (workshops, team builders, etc.).

- *Anticipating conflict.* An adult conflict mediator was designated among the chaperones.

The Promise of Camp in a Community Youth Development Initiative

Grizzly Creek Ranch provided a supportive environment for youth and adults to engage in leadership activities, practice leadership skills, discuss issues in their communities and strategize on how to create change. Building on what was learned during REACH, we offer two recommendations for how youth camps might be enlisted in support of youth-driven community change.

Group activities and free time at Grizzly Creek Ranch gave campers a chance to enjoy and appreciate the outdoors.

Key Recommendations:

• A summer camp has the potential to serve as an integral part of a reflection and planning cycle for a community youth development initiative. If—as was true in REACH—most coalition work in communities is happening during the academic year, a summer camp can provide space for peer learning that looks back on what has happened in the past year and looks forward to future strategies and activities. By creating a safe and productive space for relationship building, reflective conversation and brainstorming, camp organizers can support local organizing, cross-community learning and stronger regional connections.

• Existing summer youth camps—whether run by cities, nonprofits or faith-based groups—might consider how to engage the youth they serve in community change activities. We are not suggesting that they replace existing activities—such as recreation, skill-building, etc. Instead, there may be an untapped capacity to add an extra dimension to the camp by capitalizing on the presence of the youth program participants who might be assets in planning or implementing community change or improvement strategies.

REACH Camp 2007

For More Information

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