LET'S HEAR FROM THEM: YOUTH PRACTITIONERS' EXPERIENCES

WORKING WITH LOW-INCOME YOUTH

A Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

This study stems from an *Urban Food Desert Pilot Project* evaluation report funded by Texas A&M AgriLife Extension. The evaluation report revealed key questions to examine as the 4-H Youth Development program develops new efforts to provide services to low-income youth. The purpose of this study was to identify solutions to effectively address the issues that arose from the evaluation report by interviewing nine youth practitioners in the state of Texas. The project's evaluation data was juxtaposed with the perspectives from the youth practitioners to create more effective options for addressing the challenges posed by the participants and staff of the *Urban Food Desert Pilot Project*. The analyzed data reveals that the perspectives of practitioners and stakeholder groups in the project shared similar concerns, e.g., low retention of participants, lack of parental involvement, and miscommunication among partner organizations. The results signify attributes of successful programs, e.g., building relationships, mentoring, and creating an inclusive environment for the youth, all of which were felt to be essential in youth programs. In addition, challenges identified were as follows: low-income students lack college preparation, more training needed to work with at-risk youth, keeping staff and program participants' motivated, low parental involvement, and better communication among collaborating organizations. The study confirmed that youth practitioners are essential for ensuring youth benefit from program activities, thus their experiences are valuable for enhancing such programs.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my family. Dedicó este trabajo para mis padres, a mi mamá por su apoyo y sus oraciones, a mis hermanos/hermanas, Felipe, Juan Manuel, Carolina, Sandra, Juana, Israel, y Abraham gracias por su paciencia.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

One hundred fifty years ago, the Morrill Act of 1862 started a revolution in higher education in the United States (U.S.). In the middle of the American Civil War from 1861 to 1865, Justin Smith Morrill exercised vision and leadership by proposing the act that provided each state with federal land to create public universities to teach agriculture, mechanics, and military tactics (Adelaja, 2003). Morrill emphasized providing access and quality education to the working class, farmers, and industrial workers to gain skills and practical education necessary for a better life.

On July 2, 1862, President Abraham Lincoln signed the First Morrill Act, which led to the prevailing land-grant university system in the U.S.:

> An Act donating public lands to the several states and territories which may provide colleges for the benefit of agriculture and the mechanic arts: Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America, in Congress assembled, that there be granted to the several states, for the purpose hereinafter mentioned, an amount of public land, to be apportioned to each state, in quality equal to 30,000 acres, for each Senator and Representative in Congress to which the States are respectfully entitled by apportionment under the census of 1860; …and be further enacted, that all monies derived from the sale of lands aforesaid…shall be invested in stocks of the United States, or of the States, or some other safe stocks, yielding not less than five percent, upon the par value of said stock; and that the money so invested shall constitute a perpetual fund, the capital of which shall remain forever undiminished, and the interest of which shall be inviolably appropriated…to the endowment, support, and maintenance of, at least, one college where the leading object shall be, without excluding other scientific and classical studies, and including military tactics, to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts, in such manner as the legislatures of the states may respectively prescribe, in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life.(Appleby, 2007, p. 6)

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The second Morrill Act (1890) extended higher education access to African-Americans by establishing many of which are now known as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) (Laden, 2004). In 1994, Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) were founded by another Morrill Act to meet the educational needs of American Indians (Appleby, 2007). The most recent push for equality is the Food, Conservation and Energy Act of 2008, which authorized the establishment of Hispanic-Serving Agricultural Colleges and Universities (HSACUs) (National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), n.d.). HSACUs have at least 15 percent of the degrees awarded in agriculture-related programs and serve a minimum of 25% Hispanics (NIFA, n.d.).

To date, the land-grant university mission has expanded beyond teaching to include research and extension. The Hatch Act of 1887 provided funds to land-grant universities to establish agricultural experiment stations (Appleby, 2007). Consequently, the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 created the Cooperative Extension Service by providing support for land-grant universities to offer educational programs to the public (Adelaja, 2003). The act envisioned a land grant system, which provided solutions from laboratories to the fields and homes of whom majority were farmers (Adelaja, 2003). Over the years, the country became more urbanized as the number of farms and farm population declined (Ilvento, 1997). In a report assessing the adaptations of Cooperative Extension Service to meet the public's changing needs and priorities, one of the major recommendations was to encourage the development of urban programs, particularly to reach low-income households (Ilvento, 1997). In order for Cooperative Extension

Service to remain relevant and effective in the future, continued efforts are still needed to impact low-income communities.

Among the various educational programs under the Cooperative Extension Service umbrella is the 4-H Youth Development Program (4-H), which is the most recognized across the country. It is the nation's largest youth-serving organization, delivering programs to more than six million youth, ages 5 to 19 in the U.S. (National 4-H Council, 2014). Originally, 4-H emerged as an idea to involve youth as facilitators between research scientists and extension educators and farmers. Extension educators found that youth were more willing to adopt new agricultural technologies than were adults (Van Horn, Flanagan, & Thomson, 1998). With the declining farm population, 4-H adapted to meet the needs of all young people. Currently, 4-H continues to be a key element of Cooperative Extension Service programs, but it is being challenged by a youth population demographic that is increasingly more ethnically and racially diverse.

An increasingly diverse workforce has broad implications for Cooperative Extension Service programs. Cano and Bankston (1992) stated that minority agents, assistants, and volunteers serve as a catalyst for recruiting and retaining minority youth in 4-H programs. In addition, 4-H Extension agents not only deliver program activities to youth but also become role models. Jones and Larke (2003) stated that having role models are important because they play a critical role in the career decisions of youth. However, youth and parents mentioned the lack of minority role models as a barrier to participation in 4-H and Extension programs (Cano & Bankston, 1992). Thus, it is

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important to increase the number of minority professionals in the field who can serve as mentors for prospective professionals (Outley, 2008).

Having mentors and other professionals who have overcome obstacles similar to those confronting the target youth is important. The target youth are from different backgrounds including first generation college students, racial and ethnic minority, low-income households, and foster care. There is a lack of good role models in these communities, exposing youth to mentors and other professionals from similar backgrounds can serve as a concrete model for success (Rhodes, 2004). The following is a current example of a community garden organization where the present challenges could be associated to the lack of role models that are like the targeted audience. An intern with the organization reports:

> I recently got an internship position with a non-profit organization that promotes community gardens in low-income communities. I was thrilled to use my experience and knowledge in agriculture to make a difference in my city. As an intern, part of my responsibilities is to conduct surveys to evaluate the progress of the program. I have visited several community garden sites to distribute surveys to the participants. One garden in particular is for Southeast Asian refugees. On my visit I observed how the managers (garden leaders), where all Anglos With the diverse clientele the organization serves I honestly did not expect that. I was curious to ask the garden participants what they were growing in the garden, and why. I wanted to learn more about them, but I was unable to communicate with them since they didn't speak English. Speaking with the supervisor about the surveys he said, "You'll be lucky to get one or two questions from them, they don't speak English, they are ignorant, they don't even know how to write in their native language." I was mortified, but there was nothing I could do. I wanted to correct him but as an intern there was really nothing I could do, or at least that's how I felt. Perhaps it's due to the fact that I am also a minority, or the fact that as an intern with the organization I am the only brown rock in a sea of white sand. Looking back at it, I wish I had said something, that instead of being shocked, I would have had the courage to stand up to him and his ignorance. (J.S. Flores, personal communication, October 23, 2015)

Texas is home to some of the fastest-growing cities in the U.S, including Houston, San Antonio, Dallas, and Austin. As the Texas population grows, there are challenging demographics shifts. Currently, Hispanics/Latinos make up 37.6 percent, African-Americans 11.8 percent, Asians 3.8 percent, and Whites 45.3 percent of the Texas population (U.S Census Bureau, 2014). In response to these trends in population dynamics, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service is expanding efforts to "deliver research-based educational programs and solutions for all Texans" (Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, n.d). One way of achieving this goal is by developing and implementing community-based programs through 4-H Youth Development that equips youth with knowledge and experiences related to food and agriculture.

To respond to the changing demographics, in the spring of 2014, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service funded and launched a pilot project, "Urban Food Desert Pilot Project," to address two problems: (1) the low numbers of minority County Extension Agents and (2) the lack of nutritious food in urban food deserts. In response to the first problem, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service recognized the low number of minority County Extension Agents. The demographic workforce of Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service's in 2013 was 85.7% White, 10.2% Hispanic/Latino, 2.04% African-American, and 2.04% American Indian (Dromgoole & Ballabina, 2013). An applicant pool summary of January through November 2013 showed there were 149 Hispanic applicants of which six (4.0%) were hired and there were 44 Black applicants of which one (2.3%) was hired. This compares to 612 White applicants of which 74 were hired (12.1%). See Table 1.

Table 1.

Extension Applicant Pool Summary, January-November 2013

Applicants	Hispanic		Black		White		Totals
	F	M	F	M	F	M	
Applicants	89	60	25	19	354	258	805
Hired	5	1	1	0	39	35	81
Percent Hired	5.6%	1.7%	4.0%	0.0%	11.0%	13.6%	10.1%
Total Applicants	149		44		612		805
Total Hired	6		1		74		81
Total Percent Hired	4.0%		2.3%		12.1%		10.1%

The second problem focused on urban food deserts. Food deserts are defined as "urban neighborhoods and rural towns without ready access to fresh, healthy, and affordable food" (United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), n.d., "Food Desert," para 1). The USDA reported that 23.5 million people live in food deserts and more than half of the residents in these deserts (13.5 million) are low-income. The lack of access to healthy food contributes to higher incidence of obesity and other diet-related diseases (USDA, n.d.); as result, the pilot project focused in Bexar County (San Antonio) on improving access and availability of healthy foods through community gardens. Also, the project offered young people practical service-learning experiences, engaged them in developing useful life skills, and introduced them to professional agricultural career opportunities (Schattenberg, 2014).

Problem

This study illustrates the *broader issue* concerning the low numbers of minority applicants and hires for County Extension Agent positions by Texas A&M AgriLife

Extension Service. The *specific problem* this study address is the knowledge gap between successful program practices among youth practitioners reaching youth from different backgrounds i.e., minority, low-income, and at-risk youth. The study gathers the experiences of current youth practitioners and proposes successful practices or lessons being learned that may be taken into account in developing and implementing 4-H Youth Development programs.

Background of Study

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service internally funded the "Urban Food Desert Pilot Project" to respond to two problems: (1) the low number of minority County Extension Agents and (2) the lack of nutritious food in urban food deserts. The project was implemented with the collaboration of the Boys and Girls Club, Inc. (B&GC) and the Bexar County Extension office in San Antonio, Texas. Pilot project activities provided the groundwork for the development and implementation of a longer-term externally-funded project that includes Bexar and Harris Counties (Houston). Funding for the new project was approved in the summer of 2014 by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture of the USDA through the Children, Youth, and Families At-Risk Sustainable Community Projects (CYFAR) program.

Pilot project activities spawned from a community garden built at the B&GC starting on January 7, 2014 and ending with a celebration on June 19, 2014. During this time 24 teens ages 14 to 17 participated in the activities. A majority of participants were Hispanic males. Two on-site instructors, an Extension agent and a master gardener taught the students how to build a garden from what had been a concrete slab. Activities

were approximately two hours long on Thursdays and Saturdays. The teens built ten raised beds and learned to care for what they planted. The teens were also taught lessons on nutrition and participated in many science-learning hands-on activities.

During and upon completion of the project activities, an evaluation was conducted. The evaluation included qualitative and quantitative data gathered from various stakeholders. Following is a description of the four sources of information for the pilot project evaluation.

1. Observations – Three persons, who had coordinated, participated, or observed activities, summarized their observations. No instructions as to content or format were provided to the observers.

2. Teens' pre-flection and reflection exercises – pre-flection is a process of becoming aware of expectations associated with a learning experience that is anticipated. The intent is not only to raise awareness of expectations, but also to increase readiness to learn from the experience. The exercises can be seen as connectors between thinking about an experience and actually learning from the experience (Jones & Bjelland, 2004). Ideally, a pre-flection survey is administered to students at the start of a learning program. Next, a reflection survey is administered to the same set of students at the end of the program using the same survey. The results are compared to assess changes in perceptions, attitudes, and knowledge. Because not all the same students started and ended the program, the reflection at the end of the program was different from the pre-flection survey. That is, there were 24 respondents in the pre-flection survey, but

only eight (8) in the reflection survey and some of the students at the end were not in the group of 24 at the start. It was felt that the questions in the reflection survey would still provide some comparison with the pre-flection survey and offer some interesting and relevant insights that should be taken into consideration in the newly-funded CYFAR project and future programs of this nature.

3. Journaling has many benefits. Besides reducing stress, accelerating healing, and encouraging writing, journaling helps with personal growth and problem solving (Robson & Steen, 1999). In this project the idea was to have the teens be more cognizant of what they were doing by causing them to reflect and write what they were experiencing. By writing; hopefully, the teens would be motivated to not only take advantage of a learning opportunity, but also recognize their individual talents and potential. The teens kept journals to write and draw about their experiences throughout the project period.

4. Focus group survey and discussions were held with four stakeholder groups: teens, volunteers, B&GC staff, and Bexar County Extension staff. The discussions centered on gaining information about how each stakeholder group described the pilot project, what they felt was working well with the project, what needed attention for improvement, and what other information they felt relevant. The qualitative responses where content analyzed and quantified.

The evaluation produced 52 key questions organized into six categories that were deemed important to consider when developing youth programs. The key questions addressed in this study are listed below.

1. Regarding the long-term goal of the project:

    a. Does this approach have potential for increasing the number of County Extension Agents from underrepresented populations (i.e., African-Americans and Hispanics)?

    b. Was the pilot project successful in reaching low-income, at-risk students?

    c. Was the project successful in gaining support from Extension agents, specialist, and staff to have a long term and sustained impact?

2. Regarding introducing the project

    a. How can we improve how we advertise and recruit teens for the project?

    b. How can we improve the participation and retention of teens in the project?

3. Regarding the implementation of the project

    a. How can the garden program be a vehicle for enabling teens to learn about the wide array of Texas A&M AgriLife Extension programs in urban areas?

    b. How could we use the teens' motivation to maintain consistent participation throughout the project?

4. Regarding organizing and staffing the project

    a. Is 16 weeks sufficient time for the program to be effective?

b. How can we organize the garden program and make it tailored to the needs and interests of the teens?

c. What are the qualifications of staff needed for the project?

5. <u>Regarding expanding the pilot project beyond gardening</u>

a. How can we include and explore other opportunities beyond gardening in the program (e.g., leadership development, service learning, and more specific topics such as entomology, plant pathology)?

b. How can we promote the project to encourage more family participation?

6. <u>Regarding evaluating the project</u>

a. Are there any other ways of measuring knowledge gained from the project (e.g., journaling, scrap booking, photography, poetry, music)?

b. Why would the teens recommend the program?

Purpose and Objectives of Study

The purpose of the study was to produce options for responding to key lessons learned and questions that emerged from the Urban Food Desert Project evaluation. Objectives:

1. Analyze the Urban Food Desert Project evaluation and refine key questions that garner attention for the implementation of the Children, Youth, and Families At-Risk Community Project (CYFAR)

2. Explore the perceptions of current youth practitioners (a) about their youth programs, (b) what has worked well, (c) what they would do different, and (d) what key lessons they have learned reaching low-income youth; and

3. Gather the perspectives of youth practitioners to identify patterns of effective

    practice.

Significance of Study

The findings of this study are of particular significance to Extension for two reasons. First, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service has been awarded a five-year grant through the USDA's Children, Youth, and Families At-Risk Community Project (CYFAR) national initiative to conduct activities in Bexar and Harris Counties. This grant builds on the pilot project; therefore, the outcomes from this proposed study will be considered for implementation during the planning year for activities to be undertaken in subsequent years. Second, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service's long-term goals include improving the number of minority County Extension agents. To do this, Extension expects to expand efforts such as the CYFAR project to address the long-term goal to other parts of the state and across the country. Having options based on extensive research of successful efforts from across the nation is important for developing and implementing novel and innovative activities that will increase chances of success of the CYFAR project and other projects with similar objectives.

Limitations

By purposefully selecting youth practitioners who are currently working with low-income youth, the sample is biased toward individuals who are passionate and enthusiastic about helping low-income youth and their families. In addition, the small sample size limited the study to gain a deeper understanding of practitioners' experiences.

Definition of Terms

4-H Youth Development Program (4-H)— "4-H is a national leader in health-related educational issues including nutrition, physical activity, safety, social-emotional health and the prevention of drug and alcohol use" (USDA, n.d, para 1). 4-H provides outreach programs from the land-grant universities, Cooperative Extension Services, and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). 4-H represents the program's focus on Head, Hear, Hands, and Health.

Low-income communities—Communities with a poverty rate of 20 percent or greater, or a median family income at or below 80 percent of the area median family income (United States Department of Agriculture, n.d).

At-risk youth— In the context of this study the term 'at-risk' encompasses youth from different backgrounds i.e., first generation, racial and ethnic minority, and/or low-income household.

Hispanic/Latino— The youth practitioners implied definition of the term 'Hispanic/Latino' as Spanish-speaking individuals. The constitutive definition is "A person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race" (Office of Management and Budget (OMB), 1997, para 4).

Youth practitioners— refers to individuals who are working directly with youth and implementing, managing and coordinating program activities.

Food deserts— Defined by the USDA as "urban neighborhoods and rural towns without ready access to fresh, healthy, and affordable food. Instead of supermarkets and grocery

stores, these communities may have no food access or are served only by fast food restaurants and convenience stores that offer few healthy, affordable food options" (United States Department of Agriculture, (USDA),n.d.).

Children, Youth, and Families at Risk (CYFAR)—CYFAR is a program coordinated by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) and USDA, providing funding to land-grant and Cooperative Extension Systems to "develop and deliver educational programs that equip youth who are at-risk for not meeting basic human needs with the skills they need to lead, develop, productive, contributing lives" (USDA, n.d., para 1).

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of the study is to produce options for responding to key lessons learned and questions that emerged from the Urban Food Desert Project evaluation. Consequently, the literature reviewed related to the key questions that arose from the pilot project evaluation. The literature is divided into three sections: 4-H Afterschool Programs, Connecting Gardens with Youth, and Understanding At-risk Youth.

At the end of every school day when the bell rings, more than 15 million children and youth are left unattended during non-school hours (Afterschool Alliance, 2009). Due to the demands of work and low wages in urban communities, there is often no adult at home when school is over (Roffman, Pagano, & Hirsch, 2001). Researchers opined that the unsupervised time may have negative repercussions for youth such as academic and emotional problems, delinquency, and drug usage (Anderson-Butcher, Newsome, & Ferrari, 2003). These are more detrimental to youth living in poor inner-city neighborhoods where the negative outcomes can lead to at-risk behaviors (Calderón, Robles, Reyes, Matos, Negrón, & Cruz, 2009). Thus, positive gateways for at-risk youth are afterschool programs. According to Afterschool Alliance (2009) participation in afterschool programs is related to improvements in academic performance, school behavior, attendance, and graduate rate.

Several studies highlight the benefits youth gained from participating in afterschool programs. They developed relationships with others that cared about them

and learned positive behaviors and skills to succeed beyond school (Carruthers &

Busser, 2000; Jarrett, Sullivan, & Watkins, 2005). More specifically, afterschool

programs offer access and resources to at-risk youth, such as having supportive adults to

make informed decisions regarding postsecondary education and careers (Hooker &

Brand, 2010). Despite the growth of afterschool programs, these programs have not

necessarily targeted adolescents, in fact, opportunities decline rather than increase with

age (Pittman, Yohalem, Wilson-Ahlstrom, & Ferber, 2003). Most afterschool programs

target elementary age students (Hall & Gruber, 2007). For this reason, Hall, Williams,

and Daniel (2010) emphasized afterschool programs are valuable for adolescents,

especially those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

To respond to the needs of low-income youth, 4-H youth programs and land-

grant universities are collaborating to provide programs to enhance diversity and

encourage opportunities for youth from different backgrounds (National 4-H Fact Sheet,

2012). In addition, for youth development practitioners to be successful in today's

multicultural society, understanding the constraints low-income youth experience is

critical in creating programs to enhance the lives of all youth (National 4-H Fact Sheet,

2012). Scholars have suggested that Extension youth development practitioners could

increase access to programs by partnering with community-based youth organizations to

reach minority youth through 4-H programming (Ferrari & Sweeney, 2005). Hence, 4-H

programs are well positioned to help adolescents minimize negative risks.

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4-H Afterschool Programs

4-H Youth Program (4-H) is the nation's largest youth serving organization, delivering services to six million youth, ages 5 to 19 in the U.S (National 4-H Council, 2013). 4-H has been around more than a century, early developers of 4-H saw a need for practical programs for rural youth as a way to involve parents to adopt new and more efficient farming, ranching, and home economic practices (Rasmussen, 1989). Today, 4-H offers programs that range from animal science to robotics, environmental protection, and computer science (4-H, 2013). The broad programs include camps, clubs, and afterschool programs. The afterschool activities teach children and youth citizenship, healthy living, science, engineering, and technology (4-H, 2013).

4-H is great at providing positive role models for youth through hands-on activities (Riggs, Lee, Marshall, Serfustini, & Bunnell, 2006). However, many at-risk youth do not participate in 4-H or other community-based programs (Riggs et al., 2006). Factors that can contribute to the low involvement include that parents are unaware of 4-H programming opportunities (Bruyere & Salazar, 2010). In an effort to promote and sustain a diverse workforce in the agriculture-related disciplines, Extension and 4-H programs have the potential to provide opportunities to youth (Jones, LaVergne, Elbert, Larke, & Larke, 2013). Van Horn, Flanagan, and Thomson (1999) addressed such questions as: How has 4-H addressed the changing needs of youth? How has the organization adapted? Although the answers are outdated, the points stressed by the authors are still relevant today.

Bruyere and Salazar (2010) asserted there is a need for an innovative and culturally relevant 4-H program that can be adapted to a population that is becoming more diverse and dynamic. To address these concerns, Boyd (2011) implemented an afterschool leadership program, 4-H Youth for Community Action (4-HYCA) focused on reaching inner city middle school age students in Fort Worth, Texas with a large minority student population. The purpose of the program was for youth to learn and practice leadership skills in a service-learning environment (Boyd, 2011). For example, through service learning projects students practiced brainstorming, setting goals, and working with others. Boyd suggested using the 4-HYCA model to engage at-risk youth (Boyd, 2011). Fraze, Rutherford, Wingenbach, and Wolfskill, (2011) presented a different recruitment model called Big City, Big Country Road Show (BC2BC), which was a workshop for traditionally, underrepresented inner-city high school students with no agricultural background. At the end of the workshop, students perceived attainable agricultural careers such as web designer, photographer, government official, and landscaper. This workshop presented agriculture in a different way to engage inner-city youth and explore agricultural subjects and careers (Fraze et al., 2011). The pre- and post- workshop surveys demonstrated hands-on experience significantly affected students' identification of careers they could attain with an agricultural science degree (Fraze et al., 2011). Lastly, Fraze et al. (2011) stated that emphasizing information technology is a critical factor for students to consider agricultural related careers.

In a study based in Colorado, Bruyere and Salazar (2010) explored how to engage the Latino population in science, through outreach activities via an Extension-

supported youth program. The outcomes of the study included an increase in interest in science programs among Latino parents of students K-6th grade, asserting that family-level programming is important for program staff to promote and adapt into their activities. While the program provides great benefits for youth, parents are unaware of the opportunities in youth programs. Bruyer and Salazar (2010) recommended advertising programs through non-traditional partnerships, for example churches and word-of-mouth.

Ferrari and Sweeney (2005) undertook a study to discuss the benefits, challenges and key successes from collaboration between an Ohio 4-H youth program and the Boys & Girls Clubs of Columbus, Inc. (B&GCC). The "club-within-a-club" program model was implemented in which a 4-H club operates within the structure of a community-based organization (Ferrari, 2002). The B&GCC staff's perceived benefits from the collaboration. For example a positive outcome was engaging and captivating urban youth who were previously not involved in 4-H. In addition, the B&GCC staff supported 4-H activities such as gardening because youth were exposed to new experiences. The challenges mentioned from the collaboration are inconsistent attendance, minimal parental involvement, and adapting 4-H project materials. Lastly, Ferrari and Sweeney (2005) emphasized the key to success is communication and a sense of ownership from both organizations.

Connecting Gardens with Youth

Miller, Lee, and Berle (2012) developed an afterschool garden program with direct links to the university. College students from food, nutrition, horticulture, and

social work majors were placed in afterschool sites to work with elementary school age students to grow food gardens in low-income communities in Georgia. Miller et al. (2012) pointed out challenges at the university level including several structural and logistical challenges in creating interdisciplinary learning programs. The authors' emphasized communication is important when working with different project sites and stakeholders (Miller et al., 2012). In addition, college students faced problems such as missing garden supplies, limited indoor space to work with the children, and disjointed communication. Obstacles among the teams of students themselves were the amount of time available and initial ambiguity of their roles (Miller et al., 2012).

Thorp and Townsend (2001) sought to understand the impact of a school garden and garden-based curriculum in an elementary school in Michigan. The elementary school struggled with low standardized test scores. As a result the authors implemented a school garden to intervene and reconnect students to school. The authors reported two major findings in regards to sustaining the garden program: recruit dedicated volunteers and partner with organizations to extend services to all youth (Thorp & Townsend, 2001).The authors also emphasized that involving parents and families in the garden activities is a critical component of the program (Thorp & Townsend, 2001). In agreement, Waliczek and Zajicek (1998) reported garden projects are a place to re-connect alienated "at-risk" city youth with nature leading to improved individual and social benefits.

Understanding At-Risk Youth

Adolescents living in urban neighborhoods are exposed to a variety of risk factors including community violence, under-resourced schools, low parental education, school dropout, and teen pregnancy among others (Mahoney, Larson, & Eccles, 2005). To counter the negative outcomes, youth programs hold a promise as the context in which urban adolescents' development may be supported (Moore & Lippman, 2005). Funding for programs serving at-risk youth have increased. For example, the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) has increased funding for land-grant institutions and Cooperative Extension to deliver programs that "equip limited resource families and youth who are at-risk with skills they need to lead positive, productive, and contributing lives" (United States Department of Agriculture, 2015. p.1).

Studies have documented that inner city youth experience high levels of stress, poverty, and exposure to violence, all behavioral and emotional factors related to educational attainment and dropping out from school (Weist, Acosta, Youngstrom, 2001; McLeod & Kaiser, 2004; Calderón et al., 2009). In addition, parents who struggle to provide the necessary supervision and monitoring because of job demands and a lack of resources to pay for other sources for childcare may find relief in these programs during out-of-school time (Halpern, 2002). According to the Southern Education Foundation, in 2013, 51 percent of the students in U.S. public schools came from low-income families.

Romero (2005) wrote that lower income households encounter barriers that impeded participation in afterschool programs. These barriers include availability, cost, transportation, or a convenient location (Romero, 2005; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003).

Also, lower income youth are more likely to have a job or household chores such as babysitting (Romero, 2005). Roth & Brooks-Gunn (2003) agreed with Romero that participation from minority groups' remains low because of availability, cost, and transportation, which impede youth from participating in afterschool programs.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Research Design

Qualitative research was conducted to get in-depth understanding of the first-hand experiences of nine youth practitioners (respondents) through semi-structured interviews. This allows the researcher to be more flexible rather than imposing rigid experiments or treatments on the practitioners (Merriam, 2009), for example, permitting opportunities to probe deeper following leading open-ended questions. In addition, the researcher used multiple sources of data to help consolidate, narrow, and interpret data. Two main sources of data for this study were Urban Food Desert Pilot project evaluation report and the results from the nine interviews, plus concepts derived from related evidence-based literature. The study obtained IRB approval to conduct interviews and utilize archived data from the pilot evaluation.

Sample

A purposive sample was used to select practitioners because of their experience developing, implementing, and coordinating youth programs. The aim was to learn about their experiences and perceptions of the successes they are achieving and limitations they are encountering (Merriam, 2009). The criteria utilized to recruit practitioners were: (1) Individuals with experience managing and implementing youth programs with backgrounds including summer programs, afterschool programs, extension-sponsored programs, and a variety of programs offered by community-based organizations. (2)

Their respective programs provide services to low-income youth (elementary to high school age), and (3) One or more years of experience working in the field. Based on the criteria, the researcher proceeded to locate potential practitioners. The process began using the Internet as a search tool, key terms used were; youth-serving organizations, afterschool programs for low-income kids, out-of-school programs in urban communities, and at-risk youth programs. The researchers constructed a list of potential interviewees with phone numbers and emails taken from the programs' websites. Then, the researcher started to contact 14 potential practitioners through five-minute telephone calls. In these calls, the researcher explained how the potential practitioner for the study was identified and located, and the purpose of the research, and requested their input to the study by participating in the research. Of the 14 practitioners initially contacted, five did not respond. A short voicemail message was left stating the purpose of the call with the researchers contact information. Eleven practitioners declined participating in the study, indicating they had busy schedules or were hesitant to respond to questions about their experiences. From the original 14 individuals contacted, three agreed to participate in the study and dates and times were scheduled for phone interviews. All three scheduled the interviews during their lunch hour. During these interviews, the researcher asked for their recommendations as to who else could the researcher contact, keeping in mind the selection criteria for practitioners for this study. This snowball process enabled the researcher to identify and contact six other practitioners that agreed to participate in the study. Of the six additional practitioners, three were in-person interviews, i.e., not by telephone, and three were conducted via telephone. The in-person interviews were in a

public location, i.e., a library and fast food restaurant. Overall, nine individuals participated in the interview.

Data Collection

Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with practitioners via telephone and in-person. The researcher had a set of guiding questions, but the style was open-ended and responsive to the lead of the interviewee (Spradely, 1979). Interviews were chosen because of the "process in which a researcher and practitioners engage in a conversation focused on questions related to a research study" (Merriam, 2009, p.87). The following questions were asked to explore the experiences of the practitioners:

(a) Could you tell me about your program?

(b) What has worked well with your program?

(c) What challenges have you faced in the program?

(d) What key lessons have you learned?

(d) What advice do you have for other practitioners that work with low-income youth?

During each interview, handwritten field notes were taken. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Six interviews were conducted via telephone and three were in-person. The researcher interviewed respondents from July to October 2015. The in-person interviews were conducted in a public and quiet place at the convenience of the participant. Member checking was done throughout the interviews by asking the respondent for clarification of information. In addition to interviews/field notes, focus

group discussions gathered from the evaluation report were used to help tell a story from multiple perspectives.

Data Analysis

Corbin and Strauss (2008) wrote that document analysis requires data to be examined and interpreted by the researcher in order to gain understanding and develop knowledge about the problem of the study. In order to produce options for responding to key lessons learned and questions that emerged from the Urban Food Desert Project evaluation, it was important to analyze and examine the data gathered. The data collected for the evaluation included:

1. Observations – Three persons, who had coordinated, participated, or observed activities, summarized their observations. No instructions as to content or format were provided to the observers.

The researcher read the written observation notes, which provided reflections and perspectives of the three individuals in regards to their experiences through the implementation of the project. The documented experiences allowed the researcher to become familiar with project activities, the people involved, and the scenarios described by each person. The researcher kept a journal to take notes and gather information about the context of the project, which provided background information to the focus group discussion from the stakeholders.

2. Teens' pre-flection and reflection exercises – pre-flection is a process of becoming aware of expectations associated with a learning experience that is anticipated. The intent is not only to raise awareness of expectations, but also to

increase readiness to learn from the experience. The exercises can be seen as

connectors between thinking about an experience and actually learning from the

experience (Jones & Bjelland, 2004). Ideally, a pre-flection survey is

administered with students at the start of a learning program. Next, a reflection

survey is administered with the same set of students at the end of the program

using the same survey. The results are compared to assess changes in

perceptions, attitudes, and knowledge. Because not all the same students started

and ended the program, the reflection at the end of the program was different

from the pre-reflection survey. At the start of the program, i.e., there were 24

respondents in the pre-flection survey, but only eight (8) participated in the

reflection survey and some of the students at the end where not in the group at

the start. It was felt that the questions in the reflection survey would still provide

some comparison with the pre-flection survey and offer some interesting and

relevant insights that should be taken into consideration in the CYFAR project

and future programs of this nature.

The researcher reviewed the pre-flection and reflection exercises and took notes on

teens' perceptions of the project before and after participating. The pre-flection and

reflection exercises were not comparable because the project started and ended with

different students, regardless, the teens' comments provided insight about their thought

processes. The researcher analyzed the pre-flection and reflection exercises by taking

notes of what teens thought of the activities, comments by program staff, and what both

teens and program staff enjoyed or disliked about the project. The information gathered

from the pre-flection and reflection exercises helped the researcher understand the focus group discussions conducted with the teens.

3. Journaling has many benefits. Besides reducing stress, accelerating healing, and encouraging writing, journaling helps with personal growth and problem solving (Robson & Steen, 1999). In this project the idea was to get the teens to be more aware of what they were doing by causing them to reflect and write what they were experiencing. By writing; hopefully, the teens would be motivated to not only take advantage of a learning opportunity, but also recognize their individual talents and potential. The teens kept journals to write and draw about their experiences throughout the project period

The journal entries painted a picture for the researcher to understand from the perspective of the teens about their learning and thought processes while participating in project activities. The researcher took notes on the comments from students indicating what they liked or disliked about project activities. This was valuable information because the teens' feedback augmented concerns and questions raised by program staff in the focus group discussions.

4. Focus group survey and discussions were held with four stakeholder groups: teens, volunteers, B&GC staff, and Bexar County Extension staff. The discussions centered on gaining information about how each stakeholder group described the pilot project, what they felt was working well with the project, what needed attention for improvement, and any other information they felt relevant. The qualitative responses where content analyzed and quantified.

The researcher analyzed focus group discussions with three stakeholders: ten volunteers, three B&GC staff, and four Bexar County Extension staff. All stakeholders were asked: (1) Tell us three things you <u>liked</u> about the garden program and (2) tell us three things you would like to see <u>different </u>about the garden program. The researcher utilized Venn diagrams summarizing the themes identified from the three stakeholder groups.

After interviews were completed, the researcher converted the handwritten notes and pilot project notes into a computer file. The researcher moved to the next step, data analysis. Data analysis begins with the process of making sense out of the data (Merriam, 2009). First, the researcher read each interview transcript, jotted down notes, and commented on frequent words, phrases or ideas that were relevant to the study. This process involves the movement between inductive and deductive reasoning, as well as the moving between description and interpretation (Merriam, 2009). Once the researcher read and analyzed all of the interview transcripts, a list of comments and frequent phrases was constructed. Consequently, the researcher used a comparative method, which involves comparing one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences (Merriam, 2009). The segments that were found to be similar are then grouped together on similar themes, and the identified themes are given names to capture the essence of the respondents' voice. A theme is words or phrases with the exact words or same meaning of the practitioners or concepts from the literature review (Merriam, 2009, p.178). After analyzing and comparing data, the researcher organized the data into common themes identified. In addition, each respondent was coded with a pseudonym using the following codes: M=Mentor, AD=Community Advocate, and

EA=Extension Agent with a random number assigned to each (e.g., M1, M2, M3, M4).

Lastly, through the process of data analysis, the researcher kept an audit trail and

reflexive journal. The audit trail "describes in detail how data were collected, how

categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the inquiry"

(Merriam, 2009, p. 223).

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Nine youth practitioners (respondents) participated in interviews. These
individuals were selected because of their experience managing and implementing youth
programs that primarily work with low-income youth (elementary to high school age).
The respondents' backgrounds included summer programs, afterschool programs,
extension-sponsored programs, and a variety of programs offered by community-based
organizations. In order for the researcher to understand the successes and limitations
youth practitioners experienced in their respective programs, the following leading open-
ended questions were asked to develop a conversation and elicit more information.

(a) Could you tell me about your program?

(b) What has worked well with your program?

(c) What challenges have you faced in the program?

(d) What key lessons have you learned?

(d) What advice do you have for other practitioners that work with low-income
youth?

The respondents are identified by the following codes: M=Mentor,
AD=Community Advocate, and EA=Extension Agent with a random number assigned
to each (e.g., M1, M2, M3, M4). In addition, the evaluation data collected from the
"Urban Food Desert Pilot Project" was taken into account, including findings from focus
groups discussions with three stakeholder groups, i.e., ten volunteers, three Boys and

Girls Club staff, and four Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service staff. Finally, the chapter will conclude with a discussion of the results and address the selected key questions from the evaluation report.

Could You Tell Me About Your Program?

In response to this question one major theme emerged; the theme was that a majority of the respondents mentioned they <u>worked with at-risk youth and their families</u> (7/9). Seven of the respondents work with students who were perceived to be "at-risk." The term at-risk is defined differently by the respondents, which included: low-income, minority (Hispanic and African-American), first in their family to attain a high school education, students enrolled in English as a Second Language (ESL) program, youth with academic problems (dropping out of school), and students in foster care (behavior and psychological problems). The various responses of at-risk demonstrate that definitions vary depending on the context and population served. Five of the seven respondents gave similar answers. Following are two examples.

> "We are promoting college, 2 or 4 year institutions, to low socioeconomic high schools, majority of students are first generations" (M1).

> "The groups of kids we work with are at-risk youth meaning they probably had academic problems or behavior issues" (M3).

The other two respondents stated working in a freshmen learning community providing services to first generation students on college campus. The two respondents stated the program predominantly serves minority students that come from low-income backgrounds, e.g.

"The program is a freshmen learning community, their parents didn't go to college they [youth] don't know what an advisor is, or [what] time management means" (M4).

Overall, one major theme that emerged was respondents have experience working with at-risk youth and their families while two respondents stated working with first generation high school students.

In response to a follow up question, "Describe your role as it relates to the program," three themes emerged. The first theme was <u>mentoring and teaching</u> (4/9), with more than half of the respondents self-identified as mentors and teachers. The four respondents defined a mentor as a caring adult, a good listener, and a provider of support to students. One respondent (M1) stated youth felt comfortable asking questions regarding college application and questions about selecting a field of study. M1 stated how being closer to the high school students' age was an advantage because students were able to relate to him. He said,

"I am a recent college graduate working at the local high school, near peer experience, I am close [in] age to them and the students are comfortable coming to me with questions"(M1).

Another respondent (M6) mentioned how during the summer program she had several responsibilities, aside from teaching students basic subjects, and developing lessons plans, she mentored students about the college requirements, and helping them prepare their applications. She said,

"I became a teacher, I taught high school seniors in the summer – English, Math, and writing and also what to expect in your senior year and how to plan for college" (M6).

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She added the students she mentored had the "mentality of just graduating from high school and that was it." Traditionally, many of these students come from families where both parents do not have a high school education, thus students perceive college as unattainable. The summer program focused primarily on providing services to low-income minority students, i.e., Hispanic and African-Americans, and exposing them to college level classes.

The second theme was <u>one-on-one mentoring</u> (2/9) with college freshmen. Two respondents (M4 and M5) mentioned leading activities for a freshmen learning community on a college campus. M4 felt it was important to build relationships with first generation students by providing information, guidance, and resources to help young people successfully transition from high school to college. Both respondents agreed students who are first in their family to attend college lack skills, e.g., note taking and study habits, to succeed in college. The respondent said, "I help manage the program…we have one-on-one meeting, connect with them [students] and build a relationship." (M4). The third theme was <u>managing and coordinating program activities</u> (3/9). Three respondents mentioned that aside from conducting their daily activities with students they also had the responsibility to manage and coordinate other program activities ranging from administrative to budgeting responsibilities. The respondents expressed collaborating with other organizations as an essential strategy to better utilize resources to reach more youth. One respondent (M3) mentioned the youth program targets disadvantaged students who come from families that struggle to purchase school

supplies, clothing, and food. They seek to eliminate these barriers for students and

provide them with the tools to succeed in school. The respondent said,

> "We have a backpack program, we partner with the San Antonio Food Bank for
> kids who need that extra food for the weekend" (M3).

In summary, respondents described their role in which three themes emerged: mentor

and teacher, one-on-one mentoring, and managing and coordinating program activities.

In response to a follow up question, "Describe program activities," a variety of

perspectives were expressed in which six themes emerged. The first theme was college

application workshops for students (1/9). One respondent (M1) felt providing first

generation students with information about college was important because he has

experienced that they don't know how to apply to college or create an email account. He

said, "We hosted college application drives in which we encourage students to apply to

one university or college" (M1). The second theme was teaching coping and social skills

(1/9). Another respondent (M2) reported working with Child Protective Services (CPS)

in counseling middle school-age students on how to control anger, the program activities

focused on teaching students how to control their emotions. The respondent said, "We

had activities where we have a circle of the kids and the kids say one thing that bothers

them…we [also] talk about what makes [them] feel better" (M2). The third theme was

providing hands-on activities to build leadership skills (4/9). For example, M3

mentioned the program activities included field trips to college campuses and job

shadowing opportunities for youth. One respondent said, "We have various program

activities such as college field trips and job shadowing internships to expose kids to

different opportunities" (M3). M3 stated these experiences help youth explore college

options and set academic and career goals. Also, EA1 reported working with Extension

as a 4-H program specialist and coordinating a USDA grant. EA1 described the

opportunities offered to low-income youth: learn about nutrition, attend field trips to

universities, and participate in team-building activities. She describes the benefits youth

gained from participating in 4-H activities: "Houston students attended a camp for three

days…they learned to collaborate, heard from Extension specialists on a variety of

topics." EA1 asserted hands-on activities help youth pursue careers that they might

otherwise have thought impossible for themselves. The four respondents agreed hands-

on activities allow youth to experience, learn, and explore different topics that captures

the youth's attention. The fourth theme was <u>one-on-one mentoring</u> with first year college

students (2/9). One respondent (M5) advises first generation students on course

requirements and selecting a major. She described how individualized mentoring has

helped her understand students' specific needs. As a counselor, having frequent meetings

with students allowed her to gain their trust. She said,

> "We had one-on-one meeting…they would introduce themselves and get to know
> them and get to their specific needs" (M5).

One respondent (M4) alluded to the notion that first generation students also lack

cultural capital such as how to properly introduce themselves to professors, etiquette

rules, and how to dress professionally. These aspects may seem trivial, but are crucial for

students both in college and in the professional world. The respondent said,

> "We bring instructors to help them [students] teach etiquette, which fork to use
> or which knife…give them the cultural capital that they [students] lack" (M4).

The fifth theme was to <u>seek donations for Hispanic scholarship fund</u> (1/9). One respondent (AD1) stated that as a member of a Hispanic scholarship fund, she is responsible for gathering funds from private business. She said, "I am involved in the Hispanic Scholarship Bryan/College Station, they send us out asking for funding to business people" (AD1). AD1 emphasized the importance of promoting scholarship opportunities to low-income high school students and their parents. AD1 added, "I also visit schools and work with the community to do word-of-mouth." After working 30 years in an elementary school, she realized Hispanic parents are often unaware of how their children can apply for scholarships. She suggested when promoting a program to low-income families and students, different avenues of communication have to be employed to assure the information is getting to the people who need it the most.

The last theme was <u>teaching child development classes to Hispanic parents</u> including teen-age mothers (1/9). Another respondent (AD2) stated the populations served by the program are predominantly immigrants from Mexico. AD2 teaches classes to parents whose child has been taken away by the Child Protective Services, she states that most parents correct their children's behavior through physical punishment. Through the classes, she informs immigrant parents about the laws and rules in the U.S. regarding how to properly control their children's behavior problems. The respondent said,

> "They [parents] get in trouble and I try [to] teach in the course on how to have good communication and good relationship with their children…they [parents] perhaps are yelling at their children, people call the Child Protective Services and kids are taken away" (AD2).

She added that although the program targets families and children under the age of four, she found that in Hispanic communities there are a lot of teenage moms enrolling in the program. Aside from teaching classes to parents, she also informs them of other educational programs offered, including English classes. The respondents' responses describing program activities are summarized in Figure 1. Illustrating the six themes identified. The researcher counted the frequency of words/phrases and calculated percentages of particular occurrences to total occurrences of all respondents.
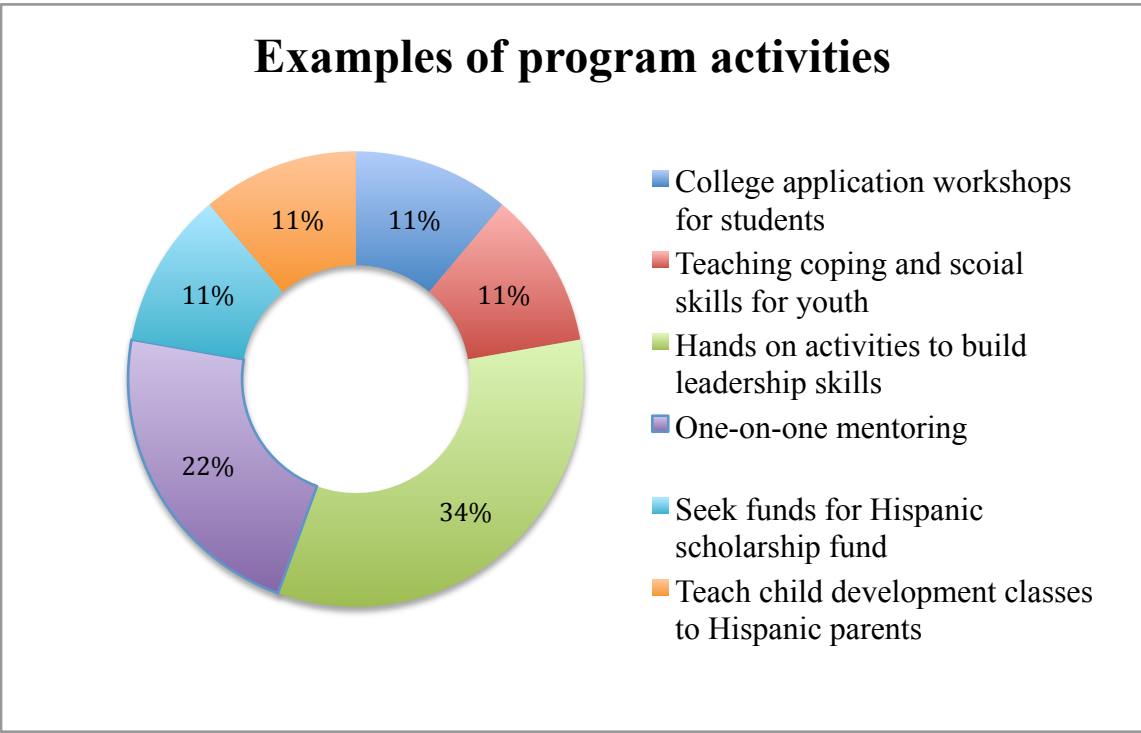
Examples of program activities

11% 11% 11% 11% 22% 34%

- College application workshops for students
- Teaching coping and scoial skills for youth
- Hands on activities to build leadership skills
- One-on-one mentoring
- Seek funds for Hispanic scholarship fund
- Teach child development classes to Hispanic parents

Figure 1. Illustrates the themes from responses of "Describe program activities"

In response to a follow up question, "What have you enjoyed most about working with youth or families?" A first theme that emerged is that more than half of the respondents reported they enjoyed <u>hearing success stories from students</u> (6/9). A majority of the respondents felt the testimonials of students amplified the success of the program. M1 remarked his job is to assist students apply for college and he felt rewarded as students shared their acceptance letters. M1 described the impact the program has on students, "For me, the students getting their acceptance letters." Another respondent (M3) reported she works with high school students who are at-risk of dropping out. A recurring theme in the interviews was a sense amongst respondents that their job is not only imparting knowledge to students, but also going the extra mile to make sure every student takes full advantage of opportunities. It is important to hire staff that is committed and passionate about helping at-risk youth because they are willing to adjust to the needs of the students. One respondent said, "I worked with the school and volunteer at the graduation, and I see them walk the stage, proof that we are making an impact" (M3). Another respondent (AD2) teaches a ten-week course on child development to low-income parents. When participants complete the course, she said they always inquire about other educational opportunities. She informs her students about: General Education Development (GED), English classes, or college opportunities. A common view amongst respondents' was that low-income youth are often unaware of educational opportunities within the community. One respondent said, "They [participants] will come back and tell me, Oh, you encourage me to go to college, thank you, I am now a lawyer or teacher" (AD2). The second theme identified was <u>getting to</u>

know the students (3/9). Three respondents mentioned building relationships with the students was valuable; working alongside students on a daily basis enables the program staff to positively influence students. M6 stated she taught basic subjects to high school students in a summer program, she expressed that having a good teacher-student relationship makes students feel comfortable to ask for help. One respondent said, "As a teacher, I was happy to make friendships and students would share their successes" (M6). Another respondent (M2) mentioned working with kids who come from troubled families that struggle to communicate, but that this can be overcome by building trust. Interestingly, common ideas expressed by the respondents are building relationships with students by informing, advising, and encouraging students. One respondent said, "We had a kid…he was emotionally disturbed and anything will trigger him…later he was able to communicate better" (M2). In summary, respondents stated two main reasons they enjoy working with at-risk youth: hearing students' success stories and getting to know the students.

In response to a follow up question, "What attributes make the youth program unique?" The first theme that emerged was that more than half of the respondents reported the uniqueness of the program was due to the diverse staff and members (6/9). EA1 expressed her experiences as a teacher and in her current position as an Extension specialist. She compared challenges faced in both professions. For example lack of transportation and language barriers. The respondent said,

> "What I have experienced from having been a teacher for nearly 10 years, is that language barriers and transportation are obstacles. Having the right staff, and partners provide opportunities to break the barriers allows for success to be attained" (EA1).

Another respondent (M4) echoed the same idea: "The mentors that we hire—they are from diverse groups, we have 50 mentors that come from different cultures and backgrounds." One respondent (M6) mentioned understanding what kids go through, particularly low-income minority students because it makes the program staff cognizant of tailoring the program to match the interest of the students. M6 said, "Those students that became teachers were once in the shoes of the kids, this adds to the value of the program." Six respondents agreed that having program staff from different backgrounds (age, culture, and ethnicity) helps youth identify with someone whose background is similar to them. The second theme emerged as a unique attribute was the support and commitment from staff (2/9). AD1 stated that when the program staff is dedicated to reach the same goals there is no misunderstanding. The respondent said,

> "The group itself—no one slacks off, we all work to reach the same goals, we have our ears and eyes open trying to get new members in to keep the program going and moving forward" (AD1).

Another respondent (M3) stated the program is unique because program offices are on-school campus. M3 said, "We are on campus every day, in school all day, alongside with teachers and school staff where the kids need us." The advantages of having the offices on-school campus are having the program staff accessible and available during school hours to assist students. The third theme was sharing promising practices with colleagues (1/9). One respondent (M2) stated that when she first started working with at-risk youth she felt unable to appropriately control behavior problems. From her experience, she stated difficult behavior situations require experience in learning how to properly handle the situations. "The staff is there to help you, give you advice. They say, hey this works

for me maybe this will work for you too." (M2). She suggested reaching out to other experienced program staff because it facilitates working with students that have unstable behavior problems. Interestingly, the majority of the respondents expressed two unique attributes of their respective programs: (1) having a diverse staff and members and (2) a committed program staff. It is important to note, that when serving a diverse student population having staff that creates an inclusive environment in the program making students feel comfortable to ask for help is important. Respondents stated three overall unique attributes of their respective program: diverse staff and members, support and commitment from staff, and sharing promising practices among colleagues.

What Has Worked Well in the Program?

This question explored strategies employed by practitioners on what is working well in their respective program. Three themes emerged. The first theme, based on responses from four respondents, is <u>teaching students skills to succeed</u> (4/9) empowers youth to learn skills needed for both college, and the workforce. For example, providing youth with the tools and resources to learn how to apply for college, financial aid, and setting academic or career goals equips youth with practical knowledge to seek educational opportunities. The respondent said,

> "Teaching students that there are opportunities for those who come from
> families that don't have enough money…they have opportunities to apply for
> scholarships" (M6).

One respondent (M6) stated enabling youth to learn how to apply for college is a simple approach, yet too many students do not know how to navigate the college or financial aid websites. She added low-income youth often fail to apply for colleges because

students perceive they are unable to afford college. It is important to mention that low-income youth have misconceptions about college and financial aid, thus it is crucial to provide information for students to learn and ask questions to remove the barriers. The second theme that emerged is building trust with the students (2/9) is important. One respondent (M2) mentioned youth do not talk a lot and are quiet at the beginning of the program, but become more proactive as they gain trust. This idea has been stated throughout the interviews, building a relationship is important to connect with youth and motivate them to not only graduate high school, but also think of career or college options. One respondent said, "In the end, the kids would open up, they come up to you and say this or that is going on" (M2). The third theme was communicating and collaborating with organizations (3/9) has worked well in their respective programs. For example, EA1 mentioned spreading the word about the youth program to local organizations and the community creates accountability to support the participating youth. EA1 said, "Master Gardeners have stepped up to the plate…collaboration to include the many activities that have taken place…communication has created excitement as word spread about the grant." Another respondent echoed the same idea, "We get out to the community and we try to get people involved" (AD2). Overall, the majority of respondents agreed about three characteristics of a successful program: teaching students skills to succeed, building trust with students, and communicating and collaborating with organizations.

In response to a follow up question, "In your opinion, what are some of the strengths in the program?" that explored in detail the qualities that make the program

successful four themes emerged. The first theme regarding strengths of the program included <u>training and up-to-date information</u> (2/9). M1 stated that as a novice staff in the program, he felt unprepared to answer all the questions asked by students. However, M1 reported the training he received in the program enabled him to learn the ins and outs of the college application process, which gave him the knowledge to better assist students. He said, "One strength of the program would be getting in-depth training and knowing where to get the information the students will need" (M6). The second theme that emerged was that <u>programs don't change people; relationships change people</u> (4/9). One respondent (M3) attributed the success of the program to the relationships fostered with students and the program staff. She stated that by getting to know the students and understanding their struggles, the program is adapted to adequately assist students. "The focus of the program is to have a relationship with the kid" (M3). Another respondent (M4) echoed the idea and mentioned having the program staff accessible and available is important to help students that are in dire need. "Emphasis is on team building, these are your mentors, trust your staff, mentors are always in their office" (M4). The third theme was <u>promoting higher education to students</u> (2/9). Two respondents (EA1, AD1) reported strengths in the program include informing students about college, which allows them to see college more attainable. EA1 stated embedding higher education into the program activities is critical to get students thinking about postsecondary education. One respondent said,

> "Minority teens will be impacted in a positive manner with nutrition, careers in agriculture, and experts in the field to reinforce the push for higher education" (EA1).

Another respondent (AD1) stated, increasing "Awareness among students about school and education is important." She emphasizes informing and advocating for low-income youth to pursue a higher education is a responsibility of youth program leaders. AD1 reported her experience as an elementary teacher when she realized that low-income youth are unaware of scholarship opportunities and deadlines. Both respondents agreed that program strengths include increasing awareness of educational opportunities and building relationships with students to encourage them to pursue higher education. The fourth theme was having a <u>flexible program</u> (1/9). For example, one respondent (AD2) stated, "Our flexibility to service the people that come that is very important, we have both English and Spanish classes" (AD2). AD2 stated that since most of the population served by the program is Hispanic single parents, teen mothers, and homeless people—they are unable to attend all program activities. Thus the program's flexibility offers the opportunity to drop-in when it is convenient for participants. Unsurprisingly, the majority of respondents agreed on four common ideas: training/up-to-date information, programs do not change people relationships change people, and promoting higher education to students. Respondents stated these qualities make programs attractive to students improving retention rates.

What Challenges Have You Faced in the Program?

Understanding the barriers encountered by respondents in their respective programs provides valuable insight into learning about similarities or differences experienced across the programs. With the different youth program settings and activities, variation among the themes was expected. Six themes emerged. The first

theme that emerged was the <u>lack of college preparation</u> (1/9), M1 talked about his

experience mentoring students and a frequent pattern he observed among low-income

high school students the lack of college preparation. He stated a lot of work and effort

are needed to continue educating low-income youth about learning how to apply for

college and scholarships. He said,

> "Students are not educated in the college process and they think they won't be
> able to get scholarships or financial aid to pay for school" (M1).

Among the unpreparedness of college preparation, the second theme that emerged was

students who are at-risk of dropping out from school <u>face serious hardships</u> (2/9). One

respondent (M6) started working in a summer school program that served low-income

high school students and found that, a persistent barrier is that students experience

family problems which negatively affects them in school. The respondent said, "There is

always that student with family problems, it's hard to talk to that student" (M6). M6

also mentioned that while the program staff tried different approaches to help the

student, at the end day the student makes his/her decision. Another respondent (M4)

shared the same views, she asserted, "You can't save them all," referring to troubled

students facing difficult family circumstances that withdraw from college. The third

theme was the constant problem of <u>keeping staff and kids motivated</u> (3/9) throughout the

duration of a program. One respondent (M5) stated that at the beginning everyone

involved in the program starts very excited; however, as the program evolves, one of the

biggest challenges was retention of participants. The three respondents' agreed involving

youth in the decision-making process and giving them the freedom to create lesson plans

and mentor younger students holds them accountable and improves retention. The

respondents said, "To keep everyone motivated throughout the year…is an issue" (M5). Another respondent (EA1) talked about her experiences implementing a 4-H program tailored to meet the needs of minority youth. EA1 said, "They [youth] realized that they indeed were minorities, but that did not deter them [youth] from participating." This portrays the low involvement of minority youth in 4-H youth programs. One respondent (M2) mentioned working with at-risk youth is challenging, thus the fourth theme identified was more training for staff (1/9). M2 reported she worked with at-risk youth that were emotionally disturbed and suggested program staff has to be prepared to handle behavior problems. The respondent said, "Maybe train people, you have to tell people to what they will be exposed" (M2). The fifth theme identified is the lack of transportation (1/9). One respondent (AD2) reported that in delivering the program to low-income Hispanic community a common barrier to the majority of participants is the lack of transportation. The respondent said, "Participants lack transportation to come to the program because they don't have cars or don't have money for bus fare" (AD2). AD2 suggested that by being cognizant of the barriers present to minority and low-income families it was important to include in the program budgets for transportation to make the program accessible to all. The sixth theme identified was low parental involvement (1/9) in program activities. One respondent stated a frequent problem faced by the youth program is engaging parents. "A constant challenged in our program is involving parents of high school age students" (M3).From her experience working with middle and high school age students, the respondent reports involving parents in program activities is more challenging at the high school level that at the middle school

or elementary school levels. She suggested that offering relevant and practical activities for parents to become involved in the programs are necessary. Overall, the respondents' experiences and challenges varied; however, an idea that continually surfaced was the need to understand barriers that students have in order to better assist them. The challenges respondents stated in their respective programs are summarized in Figure 2, illustrating six identified themes. The researcher counted the frequency of words/phrases and calculated percentages of particular occurrences to total occurrences of all respondents.
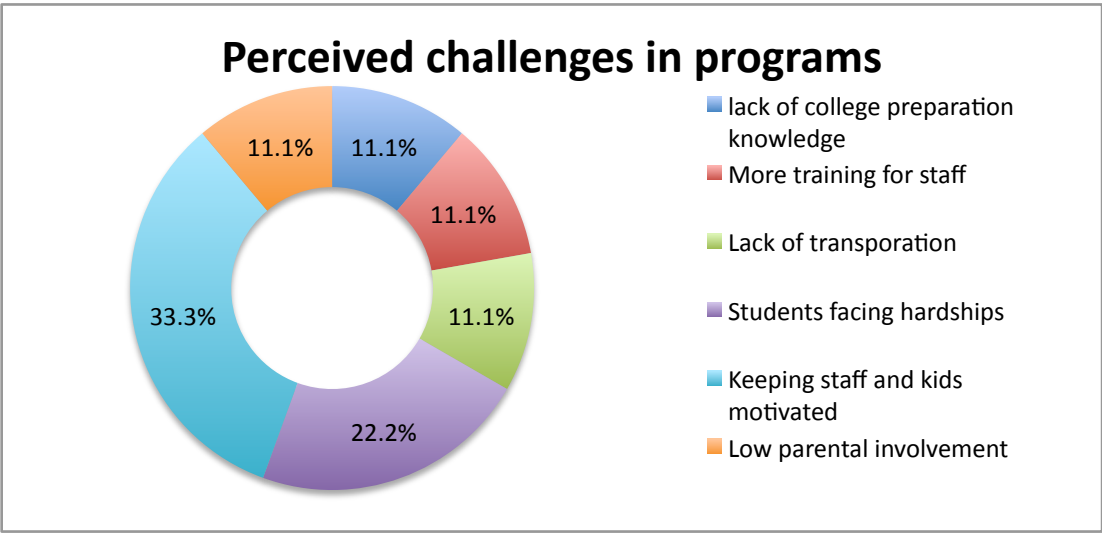

Figure 2. Shows the themes of challenges experienced by respondents

In response to a follow up question, "In your opinion, what are some weaknesses in the program?" three themes emerged. This question was asked to further understand in detail the challenges encountered by the respondents. The first theme, expressed by

more than half of the respondents, is that there is a <u>lack of funds</u> (4/9) that hinder staff from allocating money to expand the programs. One respondent said, "Having more funds to do what we do" (M3). M3 suggested that by having more funds, the program staff are able to provide resources to low-income youth to meet their basic needs including one meal a day or school supplies. The second theme was <u>changes in program structure (3/9) was</u> a weakness in programs. Three respondents stated a weakness in their respective programs is frequent changes in the program. One respondent (M4) felt overwhelmed by the constant change in the program in which every year a different program model or curriculum is utilized to meet the requirements from the top administrators. The respondent said, "Changes in the program…restructure to meet the program requirements…overwhelming to keep up" (M4). When program structure changes occur, another problem encountered is added responsibilities to staff. M2 stated that the program had fewer funds that resulted in less staff. M2 said, "A lot of kids and not enough time and staff." Although three respondents (M4, M2, and M3) felt they had limited resources, this also motivated them to seek partnerships with local organizations to gather resources to help students. The third theme identified was <u>not all students are college ready</u> (2/9). Two respondents (M1, M6) stated a weakness of the program is the push for college. Both respondents agreed some students have not being exposed to college-level classes, thus students are at a disadvantage. One respondent (M1) stated that while promoting higher education to students is a great idea, he suggested programs to offer other alternatives for students who want to enter the workforce. The respondent said, "A weakness would be the push of a four- year school. Not all students are ready

for college level classes" (M1). In summary, three major program weaknesses identified by respondents are: lack of funds, changes in program structure, and not all students are college ready.

What Lessons Have You Learned?

Respondents shared lessons learned from their extensive experience from working daily with youth and families. Four themes emerged. The first theme emerged was communication and flexibility (4/9). Four respondents reported they collaborate with various organizations requiring constant communication with all stakeholders' involved. One respondent said, "Anything can be attained when communication is present" (EA1). Another respondent (AD1) noted the value of reaching out to the Hispanic community through "radio and newspaper." AD1 stated she writes articles related to the importance of higher education and scholarship deadlines, the articles are published in a local Spanish newspaper. In addition, she gives talks through a Spanish radio to reach the Hispanic community. Another respondent (M5) stated teamwork among the staff is necessary to grow the program. One respondent said, "You cannot do it alone you need support from other people" (M5). The second theme identified was patience and setting high expectations for students (3/9). M2 reported, "Working with kids is hard, regardless of the child's problems you have to show that you care about them and have high expectations." M2 also stated that setting high expectations for students challenges them to work harder. The respondent said, "I think lessons learned are to utilize community resources to reach out to students, setting high expectations for students, and being patient."(M3). The third theme was acknowledging every student has

different needs (1/9). One respondent (M1) mentioned that while working with students who come from different backgrounds (i.e., age, ethnicity, low-income) he has learned "that every student is different, thus every student has different needs." Respondents throughout the interviews repeated cultivating healthy relationships with youth are critical not only to sustain participation but also to better assist the students in the program. The fourth theme that emerged was to foster an inclusive environment (1/9). One respondent (AD2) stated a key lesson learn from delivering program activities to low-income parents is to create a welcoming atmosphere. AD2 mentioned when participants feel welcome they are willing to participate in program activities. One respondent said,

> "Meet the person where they are, I am not to criticize that person if they only speak street language…accept everybody no matter what background, culture and ethnicity" (AD2).

In summary, majority respondents agreed on three key lessons learned from their experience working with at-risk and families: communication and flexibility, patience and set high expectations for students, and acknowledge every student has different needs.

What Advice Do You Have for Others?

Youth programs take many shapes and forms. Respondents were asked what advice they would offer to other youth practitioners serving low-income youth. Two themes emerged. The first, mentioned by more than half of the respondents, is be passionate about what you do and use resources to reach out to students (5/9). One respondent said, "Building relationships, people come in and out of the kids'

lives…show that you care" (M3). M3 stated at-risk youth struggle to do well in school because of family problems, she suggested a caring adult provides a support system for students. As a novice youth practitioner, EA1 recommended: "Utilize others who have experience in your program." Youth practitioners are often faced with challenges; however, asking for help and guidance from other experienced professionals improves efficiency without reinventing the wheel. Another respondent (AD2) asserted being passionate about helping others keeps her motivated to continue expanding the program. One respondent said, "The need is great, whatever you do, do it with passion, get updated on everything you teach and that you impart to them [youth]" (AD2). One respondent (M1) reaffirmed the importance of <u>understanding the student population served</u> (4/9) by the program. Mentoring high school students for one year, M1 stated getting to know the students he has found different ways of sustaining student participation in the youth program. He said, "Getting to know the student population and how to better assess their needs is fundamental." (M1). Majority of respondents agreed on two main points to consider when working with low-income youth is being passionate about what you do and use resources to reach out to students and understand the student population served.

Urban Food Desert Pilot Project 2014 Focus Group Discussions

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service in collaboration with the Boys and Girls Club (B&GC) implemented the Urban Food Desert Pilot Project. The project began on January 7, 2014 and ended with a celebration June 19, 2014. In order to assess the pilot project, separate focus discussion groups were held at the end of the project activities

with three stakeholders groups: ten volunteers, three B&GC staff, and four Texas A&M

AgriLife Extension staff (Extension staff). All stakeholders were asked: (1) Tell us three

things you liked about the garden program and (2) tell us three things you would like to

see different about the garden program.

The Venn diagrams summarize the themes that emerged from the focus

discussion groups with all the stakeholders. Each circle represents the perspectives of the

stakeholders'. The themes derived from the responses are listed in a key and the code

was placed in the Venn diagram to show which respondents indicated that theme.

The stakeholders with shared or different perspective can be viewed by observing the
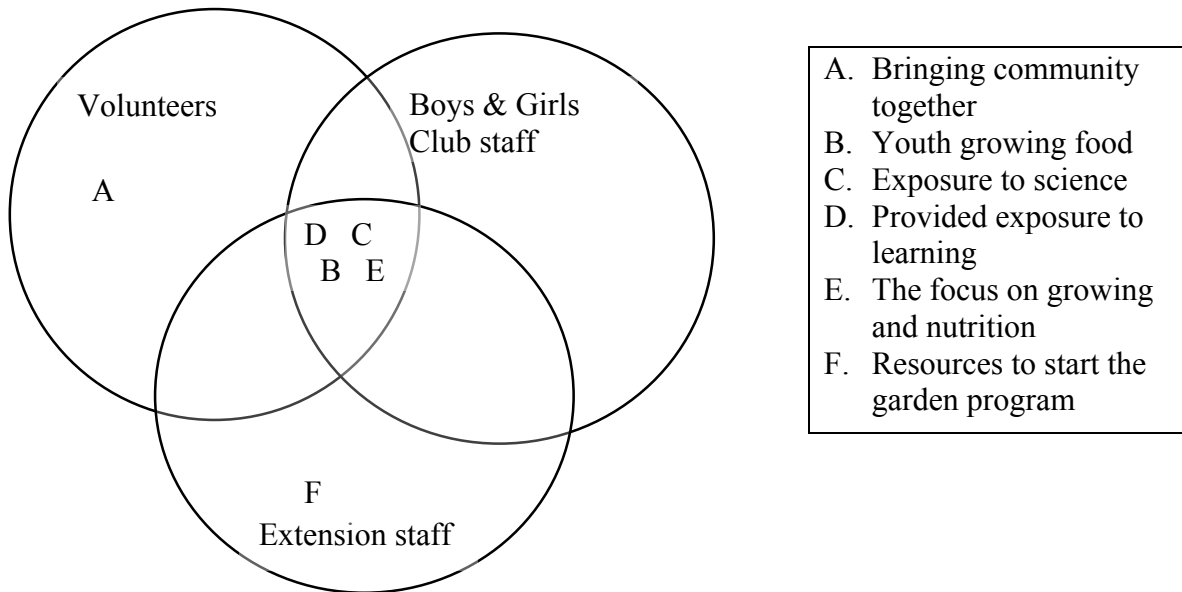
overlapping circles (see Figures 3-4).

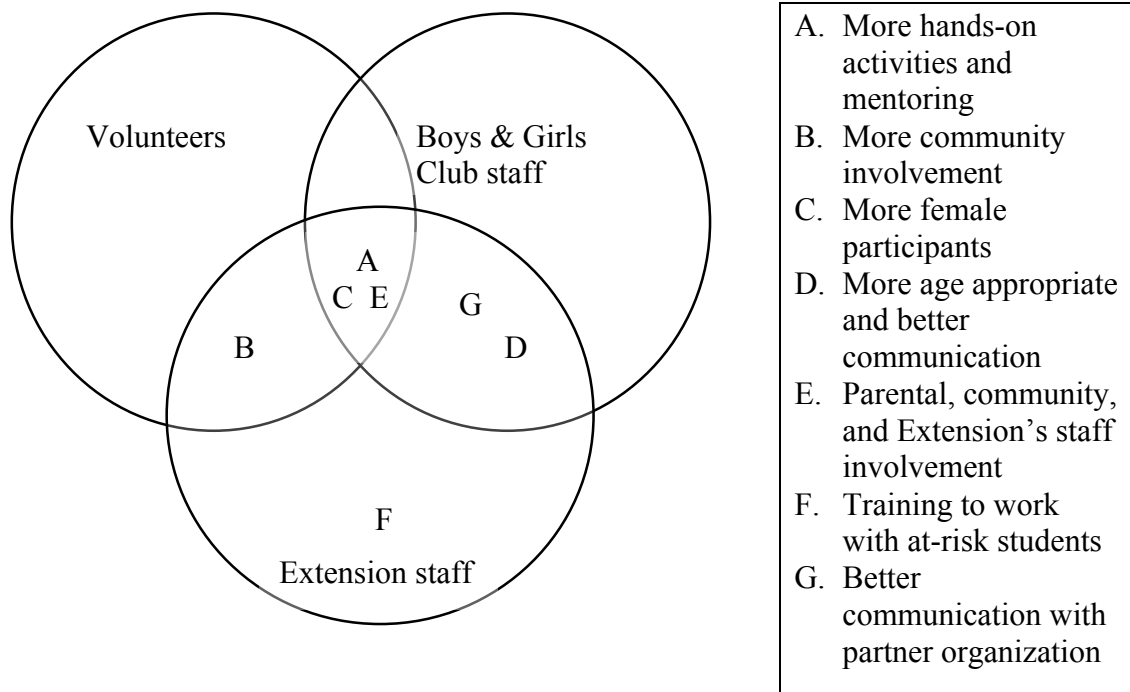*Figure 3*. Stakeholders' responses to "Tell us what you liked about the garden project"

Volunteers

Boys & Girls Club staff

A
C E
G
B
D

F

Extension staff

A. More hands-on activities and mentoring
B. More community involvement
C. More female participants
D. More age appropriate and better communication
E. Parental, community, and Extension's staff involvement
F. Training to work with at-risk students
G. Better communication with partner organization

Figure 4. Stakeholders' responses to "Tell us what you would like to see different"

Discussion

What is Working Well in the Program?

Building relationships with students. A reoccurring theme in the interviews and the focus group discussions was building trust with students. These results are in agreement with Hirsch (2005) who stated that positive and healthy relationships are important to youth's engagement in program activities. A majority of the respondents attributed the success of their respective programs to the relationships fostered with students and the program staff. In addition, prior research reports that having a caring and supportive non-family member (mentor, coach) can make a difference in compensating for the absence of such relationship at home or school (Werner & Smith,

1982). Respondents also asserted these relationships provide a safe place for students to feel comfortable to ask questions. This is a great opportunity to provide youth with information about colleges and inside knowledge about careers that could influence youth to think beyond graduating high school (Jarrett, Sullivan, & Watkins, 2005). Riggs, Lee, Marshall, Serfustini, and Bunnell (2006) suggested that when staff builds trust with youth, youth are more receptive and take a proactive role in learning new skills provided by the program. However, respondents reported there are boundaries to maintain as a professional. Pearce and Larson (2006) acknowledged cultivating peer-to-peer relationships could blur the lines of the staff but balancing friendship while maintaining an authoritative role is necessary. Thus, a critical ingredient to program success is caring youth-staff relationships (Hirsch, 2005; Shortt, 2002; Rhodes, 2004).

*Mentoring***.** A majority of the respondents self-identified as a mentor to low-income youth and frequently mentioned youth who come from troubled families often lack a good role model in their homes. Interestingly, in the focus group discussions, a majority suggested to include more mentors. Respondents mentioned they provide information, guidance, and resources to help low-income youth start thinking about college or careers. Similarly, the National Mentoring Partnerships defines mentors as adults who provide youth with support, counsel, friendship, reinforcement, and constructive examples (2004). In addition, research pointed out one effective approach to reach at-risk youth is through mentoring (Riggs, Lee, Marshall, Serfustini, & Bunnell, 2006).

Foster an inclusive environment. Another frequent idea expressed by respondents

is creating an inclusive environment by having diverse program staff and members.

When program staff has similar backgrounds as the targeted youth (low-income,

minority, first generation), "staff can serve as a concrete model of success,

demonstrating qualities that the youth might wish to emulate and offering training and

information about the necessary steps to achieve various goals" (Rhodes, 2004, p 155).

Many youth programs promote a heterogeneous youth staff and members to build

understanding and tolerance (Eccles & Gootman, 2000). For example, Big Brother/Big

Sister engages a diverse group of participants to build a sense of belonging and

awareness of different cultures (Eccles & Gootman, 2000).

What Challenges Have You Faced?

Low-income students lack college preparation knowledge. Respondents

reiterated that low-income youth have misconceptions about the inability to afford

college and lack college preparation. "Low-income youth often lack the guidance and

support they need to prepare for college, apply for financial aid, enroll and persist in

their studies, and ultimately graduate" (The Executive Office of the President, 2014).

Mentors have unique opportunities to help youth bridge the gap by informing and

assisting students to apply for college or jobs. Yet, one respondent (M1) pointed out that

not all youth are college ready. "Low-income students are less likely to take a core

curriculum, and less likely to meet readiness benchmark on college entrance exams"

(ACT, 2013). To reduce the inequalities, providing hands-on assistance to apply for

financial aid and scholarships has been shown to increase enrollment and persistence in

postsecondary education among low-income youth (Bettinger, Long, Oreopoulos, & Sanbonmatsu, 2012).

Programs need to train staff. Respondents and focus group discussions mentioned more training for staff to work with at-risk youth. Half of the respondents started as novice youth practitioners and they felt incompetent to answer all the students' questions properly. A burden is placed on novice youth practitioners because program success depends largely on the program staff (Bowie & Bronte-Tinkew, 2006). "A concern in the field of youth development is that many frontline staff, began with little training" (Larson, Walker, Rusk, & Diaz, 2015, p.76). In addition, youth practitioners work in a dynamic environment with different people including parents, at-risk youth, other staff, and community members (Larson et al., 2015). Youth practitioners also face different situations such as keeping students safe, helping them develop skills, involving parents in program activities (Larson et al., 2015). The authors added, "A problem in the youth development field is that much of the hard-earned knowledge about daily practice is not documented (Larson et al., 2015). Thus, one respondent (M2) suggested sharing promising practices with colleagues allowed her to learn from other experiences program staff on how to better handle youth's behavior.

Keeping the staff and kids motivated. Majority of the respondents alluded to the notion that staff and youth are initially very excited about the program, but throughout the year the excitement is lost leading to youth retention problems. Also the focus group discussions reported declining youth participation in the project; Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service staff indicated 24 youth enrolled initially in the program and only

eight participated at the closing ceremony. This illustrates a problem that is not only encountered by Extension programs (4-H Youth Program), but has been cited in other youth programs as a constant battle to sustain youth's motivation (Larson & Walker, 2010). In addition, youth programs are typically voluntary where youth decided whether they are interested or not by "voting with their feet." (Anderson-Butcher, Newsome, & Ferrari, 2003). Respondents suggested approaches to re-engaged youth by providing more hands-on activities that involve the parents and the community. This is further supported by Ferrari and Turner (2006) who identified other factors that motivate youth to participate: sense of belonging, safe environment, received academic support, and had fun.

Engaging parents. Half of the respondents mentioned they have problems involving parents in program activities. Likewise, focus group discussion with Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service staff reported reaching out to busy parents is challenging. One noted, "Parents just pick up and drop off their children, it's almost like a drive thru at the Boys and Girls Club." The Urban Desert Pilot Project served predominantly low-income students and families. Previous studies state parents with lower incomes are less likely to be involved in school and afterschool programs (Gutman & Eccles, 1999). These authors urge to explicitly engage parents by hosting events for families (Ozer, 2007) because parents influence youth decisions of joining and persisting in the program (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2003).

Better communication. A majority of the respondents discussed communication and committed staff is essential, particularly when collaborating with other

organizations. Focus groups discussions with stakeholders suggested better communication with partner organization. A Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service staff noted: "The Boys and Girls Club has a tight schedule, we need more time for planning…better communication to facilitate conversations with the staff." In addition, both organizations (Bexar County Extension office and Boys and Girls Club staff) expressed the lack of communication led to misunderstandings, management issues, and program activities cancelled at the last minute. Ferrari and Sweeney (2005) highlighted key players from partnering youth programs have to agree on achieving the same goals and objectives to reduce misunderstandings. Ozer (2007) attributes the success of programs to continued involvement of all stakeholders: students, parents, program staff, and teachers—everyone offers support and guidance. One respondent (EA1) augmented, "Anything can be achieved when communication is present." Thus, when problems arise about inconsistent attendance, recruiting members, parental involvement, and utilizing appropriate curriculum—collaborating organizations are able to converse and brainstorm solutions to address problems.

Advice to Other Youth Practitioners

Be passionate about what you do. Majority of the respondents stated passion is an essential quality for youth practitioners. One respondent (M2) asserted, "Working with kids is hard, regardless of the child's problems you have to show that you care about them and have high expectations." Other needed characteristics implied by respondents include: patience, cultural awareness, and commitment to help youth and provide emotional support and guidance (Ferrari & Sweeney, 2005). All respondents

shared anecdotes of youth success stories, augmenting the need for youth programs, particularly in low-income communities (Riggs et al., 2006).

In addition, a majority of the respondents stated feeling rewarded as they heard the testimonials of youth, from being at-risk of dropping out of high school to graduating. Youth practitioners' passion is transferred to program success; one respondent (M3) said, "I worked with the school and volunteer at the graduation, and I see them walk the stage, proof that we are making an impact." Youth practitioners expressed why they enjoyed working with youth from having a desire to give back to their community to following the footsteps of a role model who once made a positive impact in their lives (Walker 2003). In addition, research has shown staff training, educational background, and skill sets contribute to the overall success of the program (Astroth et al., 2004; Walker 2003). This is emphasized by a respondent (M1) indicating, "One strength of the program would be getting in-depth training and knowing where to get the information the students will need." He mentioned as a novice youth practitioner, he felt the trainings empowered and gave him the confidence to better assist youth.

Understanding the student population served. A majority of the respondents reported their respective programs served at-risk youth and their families. One respondent (M3) stated, "The group of kids we work with are at-risk youth, meaning they probably had academic problems or behavior issues." The term "at-risk" is defined differently depending on the context, e.g., education, psychology, social work, and medicine (McWhirter et al., 2012). Respondents use a definition of at-risk in the context of working with children and adolescents in low-income areas, minority (Hispanic,

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African-American), academic problems, behavior and psychological problems. Research has found that adults/volunteers/program staff serve as role models and educators for at-risk youth (Riggs et al., 2006). This is highlighted by one respondent (AD2) stating, "Meet the person where they are, I am not to criticize that person if they only speak street language…accept everybody no matter what background, culture and ethnicity." Prior research found that "adults' capacity to refrain from harsh judgment, effectively cope with difficulties, and express optimism and confidence made important contributions" in developing a relationships with youth (Hendry, Roberts, Glendinning, & Coleman, 1992). In addition, focus group discussions with Boys and Girls staff pointed out, "Extension staff became consistent mentors and built relationships with them [youth] especially the foster home students." Overall, the social support youth receive from adult staff is a major factor for sustaining youth participation in afterschool programs (Rhodes, 2004).

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to provide options to addressing key questions that emerged from the Urban Food Desert Pilot Project evaluation. The evaluation report revealed concerns that garner attention as 4-H youth programs are challenge to effectively deliver services to youth from diverse backgrounds, i.e., low-income, ethnicity, and age. In order to understand how to enhance programs reaching low-income youth, interviews were conducted with nine youth practitioners. The interviews explored their experiences about what has worked well, what challenges they have faced, and what lessons they have learned reaching low-income youth.

Although the study is based on a small sample (N=9) the overall findings suggest youth practitioners have a vital role in promoting positive youth development. In addition, the data collected from the respondents was juxtaposed with the evaluation data gathered from three groups of stakeholders involved in the pilot project: ten volunteers, three Boys and Girls Club staff, and four Texas A&M AgriLife Extension county agents. In comparing both data sets, three resounding similarities emerged: The need for (1) having diverse staff and program participants, (2) mentors, and (3) keeping staff and program participants motivated. These three lessons are further explained and could potentially be incorporated into future 4-H youth programs.

In today's multicultural society, communicating and interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds, beliefs, languages, and traditions is essential in fostering

an inclusive atmosphere for program staff and participants. This statement validates the need to hire diverse program staff, i.e., taking into account culture, age, ethnicity, and gender, which can allow the program to expand services to all youth. As a result, having diverse staff and participants fosters common grounds in which they share similar interests or opinions. In addition, a diverse youth program staff is in a better position to communicate across cultural boundaries reducing barriers that hinder youth and families from participating. For example, Spanish-speaking parents could be unaware of the learning opportunities provided by the youth program because they are unable to understand the language. Similarly, a resonating message that youth practitioners mentioned in the interviews was that "programs don't change people, relationships change people." Overall, the program staff plays a key role in promoting and recruiting participants; understanding and being culturally aware is necessary for improving services to a diverse audience.

Furthermore, the findings of this study strongly suggest that pairing program participants with a mentor whether it is a volunteer, program staff, or Texas A&M AgriLife Extension staff could positively benefit youth. Youth need additional support in navigating the ambiguity of life after high school. Having a good role model gives the student an opportunity to look up to someone for guidance, information, and knowledge regardless of if they choose a college or workforce pathway. For example, by connecting youth with Texas A&M AgriLife Extension professionals, students are able to learn what entails working as a 4-H youth development staff and what skills and education are required. Also, the youth-staff relationship creates a support system for youth who are

struggling academically, personally, or behaviorally by teaching students and modeling coping and social skills to overcome their challenges. The relationship built can take many forms from getting to know the student by name, listening to their problems, to advising the student how to apply for financial aid. The fruits of the relationship built with the students yield long-term active participants throughout the program.

Based on the findings, a concerned echoed across all youth programs is keeping staff and program participants motivated. The researcher suggests some examples to sustain youth participation. After a long day at school, students want to have fun and socialize with their friends. Engaging students with interactive hands-on activities coupled with a passionate instructor allows students to be more focused throughout learning activities. Embedding subjects such as math or science with innovative projects enable students to learn lessons and skills that can be beneficial to them. In addition, having the students share their knowledge gained to parents and community volunteers via a PowerPoint, poetry, or science board displays will allow students to showcase their skills and collaborate with one another to produce a product of which they can be proud. By providing resources and encouraging students to take initiative in creating their own projects can motivate them to become more involved. For example, have students create a website that includes newsletters about topics of interest to them and photos of their projects—not only students are actively engaged in the program but also hone their technology skills. Promoting youth to take ownership of program activities is essential especially for students that lack parental or guardian supervision during non-school

hours. Thus, keeping staff and program participants' motivation throughout the duration of the project is important to reduce retention problems.

The results of this study can potentially be applicable to programs serving all youth whether 'at-risk' or not, as teenagers struggle through uncertainty and ambiguity when making decisions about life after high school. Youth practitioners are in the frontline interacting with youth on a daily basis, they have unique and valuable experiences that are necessary to share with others to enhance program success. There is a growing need to refine and translate what is known about successful program practices by sharing promising approaches among youth practitioners. It is recommended that future research explore case studies documenting the range of challenges encountered by practitioners describing program scope, targeted population, and program activities. It is important to define the context in which successful strategies were carried out, i.e., the environmental context, e.g., what enabled successes. Therefore, creating a base line for authentic dialogue with youth practitioners to reflect on their experiences is certainly worthwhile.

Texas AgriLife Extension administrators asked a simple question: How can we address the lack of diversity in Extension? This question helped develop the Urban Food Desert Pilot Project, a 4-H youth program implemented in partnership with the Boys and Girls Club of San Antonio, Texas. The idea was to expose low-income youth to the 4-H youth development program, learn about Texas A&M AgriLife Extension careers, learn about different aspects of agriculture via a community garden, and motivate students to graduate from high school to potentially enroll in college and graduate. The youth

involved in 4-H programs can "wide-eyed" possible careers with Texas A&M AgriLife Extension and expand their narrow vision of agriculture. This has the potential to create a diverse pool of applicants qualified to work with Texas A&M AgriLife Extension thus improving the diversity workforce. In summary, this study creates a space for dialogue between Texas A&M AgriLife Extension administrators, County Extension Agents, volunteers, families, and youth about improving future 4-H programs and taking action on the simple question that Texas AgriLife Extension administrators raised.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

Instructions for the interviewers (opening statement)

Thank you very much for being willing to be interviewed. As I mentioned when we first contacted you, the purpose of the research study is to produce options for responding to key lessons learned and questions that emerged from a pilot project evaluation of a Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, entitled "Urban Food Deserts Project," which was conducted in Bexar County (San Antonio) for 16 weeks during the spring and summer of 2014. I will ask you questions related to what your project was about, what worked well, what you would do different, what were key lessons you learned, and if you know of any other individuals who have conducted similar successful programs.

1. Could you tell me about your program or programs?
   Potential probing questions:
      i. Briefly describe your role as it relates to the program?
      ii. Could you give me an example of the program activities?
      iii. What words would you use to describe the program?
2. What worked well in the program?
   Potential probing questions:
      i. Could you share anecdotes of what you enjoyed most about the program?
3. What would you do different?
   Potential probing questions:
      Describe reoccurring problems that you experienced in the program.
      Could you share some examples of the issues in the program?
      If any barriers, how can they be overcome?
      How frequently were you involved in the program?
4. What key lessons have you learned?
   Potential probing questions:
      What is your take home message for others?
      Do you know of any other individuals who have conducted similar successful programs?

Wrap-Up (5 minutes) Thank you very much for you time. With your permission, for participating in this interview, we would like to send you a note of thanks that will come from the Director of the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service.