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Promoting Sustained Engagement in a Community Ecological Literacy Program

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ABSTRACT

The Band of Environmentally-Educated and Employable Teens (BEETS) is an ecological literacy program based in the Western Addition neighborhood of San Francisco. It serves 15 – 19 year-old youth with a paid internship and by delivering theoretical and practical gardening, farming, and agricultural education. It also provides valuable transferable skills like teamwork, critical thinking, and problem solving.

BEETS participants are encouraged to reapply after they graduate, but despite attractive incentives like more pay and more responsibilities, the reapplication rates are dropping.

Using focus group and individual interview methods, research was conducted with current and past participants to investigate the effectiveness of the incentives the program offers. I also include literature on the positive impact that youth programs can have on themselves, their communities, and the programs themselves.

Suggestions for improving reapplication rates include more pay, more influence on program functioning, adjusted program time, more longitudinal curriculum, and better stated benefits of reapplying.

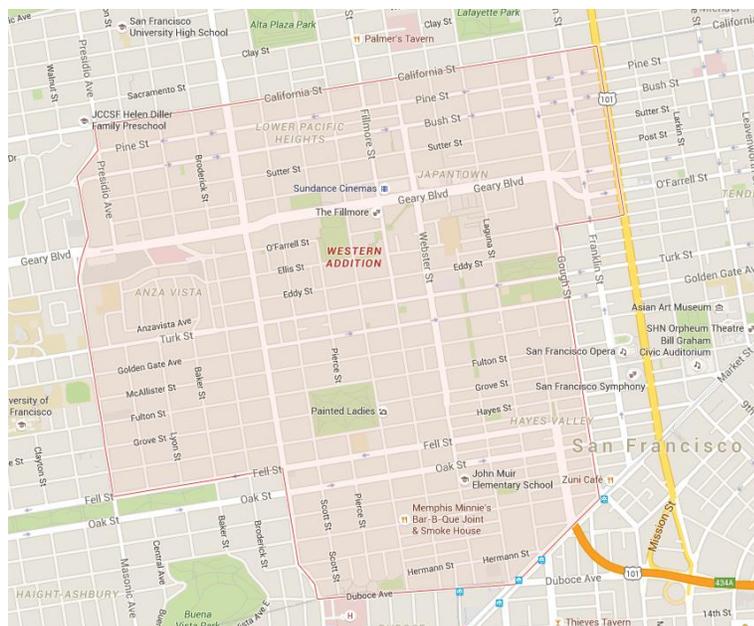
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INTRODUCTION: THE BEETS PROGRAM

Community Grows is a community based organization in the Western Addition district of San Francisco. Starting as a community garden in 1994, its goal was to impact the high rate of violent crime in the area. It has increased in size and impact to build and/or renovate eight other community gardens in the Western Addition (Community Grows, 2014). The Band of Environmentally Educated and Employable Teens (BEETS) program is one of three programs offered by Community Grows. It is an ecological literacy curriculum that is run in 3 month sessions that offers job readiness and life skills. Youth, aged 15 – 19, are invited to apply and join as paid interns and can earn up to \$1024 based on attendance. Participants meet two to three times per week, learning the theory of gardening and farming practices and then applying it at community gardens in the Western Addition and at other gardens spread throughout the city. They work independently and as part of teams to build vegetable beds, get the soil ready for planting, plant seed, prune and tend growing plants, and eventually harvest the produce. Additionally, participants:

- Assist garden education classes for elementary school students
- Attend job training and career development workshops (past workshops include resume & cover letter writing, job search skills, financial literacy, and guest speakers)
- Attend field trips (past trips include the farmer's market, camping in the Presidio, Green Gulch Farm, and Bi-Rite Market)
- Support Community Grows events in the community



Each program session focuses on a different theme related to the environment. The curriculum includes BEETS participants (BEETS) going into their communities, specifically elementary schools, to teach younger children about the content they are learning. The

goal is to educate earlier generations of neighborhood residents and solidify their own learning by teaching others. The BEETS program offers both in the form of skills building and a small salary or stipend. The remuneration serves as an attraction when recruiting and admitting participants and also simulates the model of getting paid for work.

SUPPLEMENTARY COMMUNITY GROWS PROGRAMS

SEED TO MOUTH

This program is aimed at younger community members (ages 4 - 15) and its goal is to educate participants about healthy eating and best practices for supporting a healthier lifestyle. The program has participants cooking diverse meals using healthy, fresh ingredients. Participants also learn about nutrition, cooking basics, and cooking safety.

ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

This program offers hands-on science curriculum to teach participants about the environment. It also presents opportunities for students to learn teamwork and respect each other, while studying the environment. Students go on field-trips to farmers markets, local farms and gardens, and other outdoor adventures. Through the program, students grow over 50 varieties of fruits and vegetables and the harvested produce is given to the participants and their families

BEETS PROGRAM LOGIC MODEL

The logic model below illustrates the influential forces of the program as well as its effectiveness.

Resources	Activities	Outputs	Short & Long Term Outcomes	Impact
Garden space	Recruit BEETS from low-income and marginalized population		Increased consumption of local and organic produce by garden members	Improved nutritional intake and diversity of food consumed by garden members and PFB program participants / Improved sense of self-sufficiency by garden members
Gardening Resources	Teach curriculum	Graduates	Increased knowledge, skills and behaviors for growing organic vegetables and farming practices	
Facilities - John Muir Elementary	Tend gardens	Developed gardens	Increased physical activity and enjoyment of the outdoors	Improved sustainability of local and organic food systems
Tide Foundation fiscal support	Extend teaching to community	Relationships with other community orgs and orgs with similar mission	Increased friendships and connections to the community for garden members	
Fundraising money	Harvest from gardens to be shared by the garden members and local community		Incorporation of practices and methods in domestic and local life	Improved social & mental health among garden members
BEETS participants	Opportunities for team-work, leadership and informal fun are intentionally created			

THE LITERATURE ON YOUTH COMMUNITY PROGRAMS

There is a plethora of benefits promoting and sustaining youth involvement in community programs for the communities and the participants themselves. A 1998 study of participation in community activities by young people revealed that almost two thirds of them say that “feeling as though you give back to your community” is extremely important to them (Pittman & Tolman, 2001). Youth are more often than not motivated to contribute to their communities but often lack the skills and resources, both of which BEETS offers. Involvement in programs that directly benefit the communities youth work in have been known to result in improved self-image, lower levels of child problem behavior, improved academic performance, increased school attendance and commitment, more positive peer relations, lower perceptions of community disorganization and increased prosocial behavior (Fite, Vitulano, & Preddy, 2011). Lakin and Mahoney note that during this important phase of development, adolescents experience significant physical, educational, social, and psychological changes. But this period also brings about an optimal time when youth can develop a positive sense of identity for themselves and towards others. Thus community programs provide the environment for this to happen as long as they are programs that foster both autonomy and relatedness (2006). Katie Richards-Schuster and David Dobbie explore the transformative power of “Youth Civic Spaces”. These are environments in which youth participation in civic action is fostered—the pathways, structures, and vehicles that provide opportunities for young people to engage in critical discussion, dialogue, and action. These environments, like the Koshland Garden that BEETS uses in the Western Addition, become transformed through collective engagement to become powerful sites for the development of critical consciousness and social action. When young people

have these spaces to use and, in some cases, control, it helps to foster a sense of belonging and a sense of connection (2011).

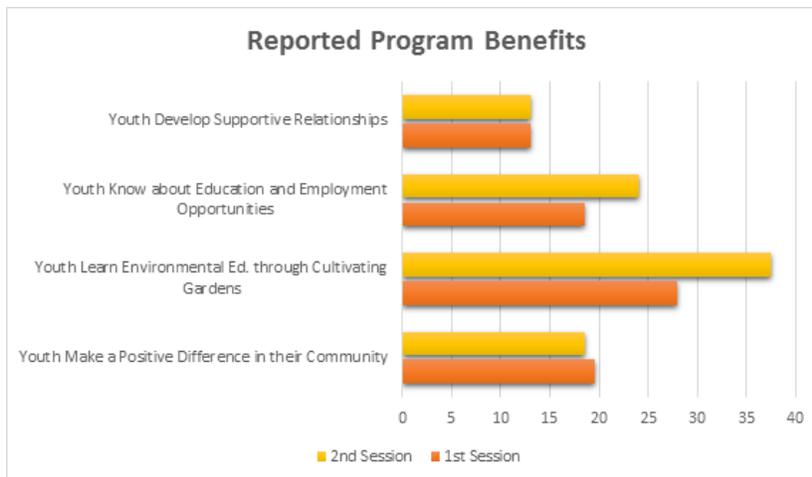
Specifically, youth programs that encourage youth involvement in the planning and delivery stage see higher success. Although many youth organizations are typically led by adults, there is increasing recognition of the role youth can play in organizing efforts. Under this model, youth are viewed not as problems, but as assets and sources of social capital that can strengthen communities and address the effects of marginalization (Schwartz & Suyemoto, 2013). In an extensive study, Mitra (2004) found that several skills developed out of established youth-adult partnership programs. Some of these include problem-solving, facilitation skills, social skills, and public speaking.

THE CASE FOR SUSTAINING ENGAGEMENT

According to BEETS' Program Manager, Melissa Tang, there are many benefits that exist for both the program and participant stakeholders:

FOR THE PARTICIPANTS

As each program session is less than three months long, participants who apply for another session benefit from continued exposure to important skills that require longer time to take hold and become habit. This is also reflected on their resumes as it indicates more consistent involvement and exposure to valuable hard and soft skills. Also, there is greater benefit if participants reapply to subsequent sessions as the consistency better assures relationship building and skill development.



The pay also goes up for participants who reapply too - \$1124 for the second sessions and \$1174 for the third session. BEETS who completed a subsequent session between the

Summer, 2013 and 2014 sessions reflected a net gain in perceived skills. According to a post-program survey, their knowledge of environmental education increased by 34% and their awareness of employment and educational opportunities in their communities increased by 30%. This skill and awareness development translates to their personal, professional and academic lives as they apply it beyond the program. In Tang's own words, "Our interns come to us with high needs. We spend a lot of time during the first session building their trust and getting them caught up on job skills during the first session". Program participants come in with a low level of trust as a by-product of the environments that they live in. Building relationships takes time and three months, or approximately 100 hours, of contact is often not enough to have a meaningful impact. Tang goes on to say that a single session can guarantee an impact on knowledge acquisition and attitude but less on behavior modification, which for them is the ultimate aim of the program. Continued exposure to positive behavior coaching increases the likelihood of these behaviors being applied in the students' personal lives.

FOR THE PROGRAM

Participants who reapply provide a higher return on investment for the program. These returns are measured via a slew of surveys and assessments issued by staff both during and after program. As program manager, Tang is responsible for delivering content as well as recruitment of the subsequent class. For her, a higher number of reapplications means less focus on recruitment and more focus on *program development, evaluation, alumni engagement, and strategy*.

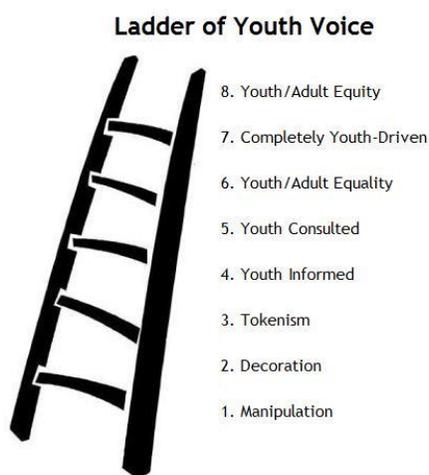
Participants who reapply to future sessions earn an increase in their stipend. But this increase is marginal, with only a \$150 increase in pay for doing a third session. By returning, interns can further develop their leadership skills in a structured leadership role that helps shape the program. Tang says, "They can continue to learn more about gardening, work with kids, and develop their job skills." Another benefit of reapplying to the program is the opportunity to take on more responsibility. Participants in their second and third sessions are given a place on the program Advisory Board which gives them more opportunities to lead projects. They are also given elevated responsibilities at each session and are asked to assist with accountability by following up with absent participants. In a personal interview, one returnee expressed enjoyment with being on the advisory council and appreciated the opportunity to get to know more people and be more involved. These participants also provide feedback on program and take on more leadership roles in the garden. They assist with outreach, reviewing applications, and interviewing future applicants.

To motivate participants to reapply, program staff talk about the benefits of reapplying. Most current and past BEETS who reapplied shared that program staff were

available to answer questions but few shared that the benefits of reapplying were explicitly outlined and promoted. From Tang's perspective, the advisory council promotes reapplication to participants and staff themselves start promoting it early in the session, but only verbally and via a single email.

THE BENEFITS OF PROMOTING YOUTH INPUT

While the program offers some opportunities for applicants who reapply to take on more responsibilities, research shows that there are many benefits to strategic youth involvement in the day-to-day functioning of the programs that serve them. Participation in program decision-making may involve cognitive and socioemotional skill building; that is, youth may experience gains in the leadership skills that they practice through program decision making. Youth programs that incorporate the youth into the decision-making practices may increase youth interest in those programs. (Akiva,



Adapted by Adam Fletcher (2011) from work by Roger Hart, et al. (1994)

Cortina, & Smith, 2014). Roger Hart, a sociologist for UNICEF, developed a measuring model of youth engagement called Hart's Ladder of Youth Voice.

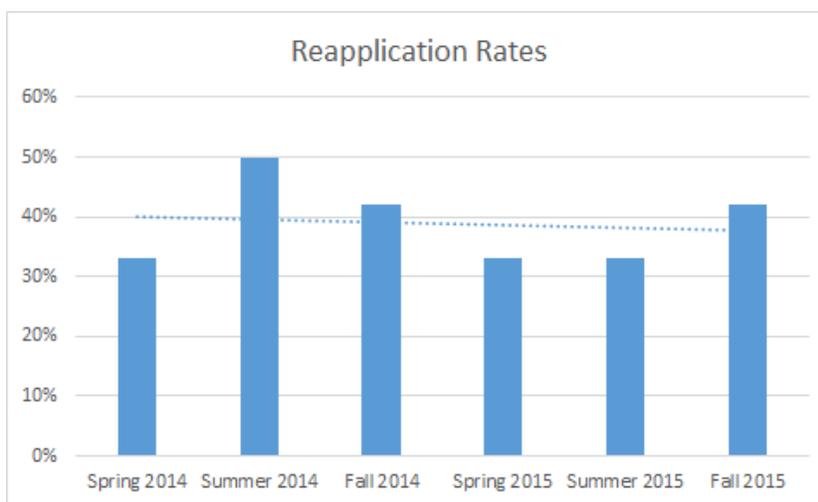
This visual representation is designed for communities and programs to measure their level and impact of youth engagement. The BEETS program would seem to exist around Rung 5. Here, the adults actively **consult** youth while they're

involved. The challenge of this stage is that youth only have the authority that adults grant them, and are subject to adult approval. BEETS participants who return are *assigned* roles in sessions. They are *placed* on the Advisory Council and are *expected*

to assist with interviewing future applicants. Higher achievement on the rungs fosters authentic youth engagement in communities and also encourages youth to sustain their presence in the program.

BARRIERS TO REAPPLICATION

As this graph indicates, reapplication rates are erratic and have trended down for the past few sessions. Tang shared that the primary reason that participants do not



reapply is because they prefer to acquire full or part time “real work” earning “real money”, as more than one focus group participant interviewed referred to it. Most of the jobs they aspire

to are in retail. Other obstacles to reapplication cited were outside family commitments and the desire to “try something else”. In the focus group, at least three BEETS expressed concerns with the travel time required to attend the week night sessions. Some had to leave during school hours to make the 3:45 pm start time at John Muir Elementary School. The focus group also shared that the pay, while an incentive to join the program, was less of an incentive to reapply. One interviewee questioned why he would “do the same thing”, highlighting a perception that subsequent sessions were a repeat of previous ones despite the reality that each session follows a different theme with different activities. Tang agrees with this by saying that for some participants it was merely something to check off their list and move on. She added that other participants

do not apply for another session because they prefer to focus on school or are unable to change their school schedule to allow for another BEETS program session.

SUGGESTED PRACTICES

It is clear that the organization is doing as much as it can to encourage participants to reapply. The overwhelming majority of those interviewed referenced the positive experiences and relationships that developed while in the program. Research with program staff and current and past participants revealed that there are efforts to encourage participants to reapply. Following is a combination of suggestions to promote the rate that participants reapply. Some are currently in practice but vary with the degree to which they occur.

INCREASED PAY: Throughout the research process, it was evident that increased pay would encourage BEETS to reapply. Focus group participants as well as interviewees agreed that more money either did or would've played a part in them reapplying. The stipend amount increased 34% for the Fall 2015 session so it is not anticipated to go up again soon without comprehensive fundraising efforts.

POSITION TITLES WITH JOB DESCRIPTION: The program emphasizes how the session is a job and participants are paid and held accountable to doing this job. Offering more titles and a stated set of responsibilities would compare selection to return as a *promotion*. Together with the increased pay, BEETS who reapply are responsible for certain tasks performed during each session and throughout the program. Currently there are roles such as Communications Coordinator and Advisory Council Representative. BEETS' Program Manager, Melissa Tang expressed a desire to eventually include a Social

Media Representative and a Photographer. Other suggestions are an Operations Coordinator, Teaching Assistant, Head Gardener, and Admissions, Recruitment & Outreach Coordinator. Complete job descriptions would assist participants with compiling resumes and help them articulate their responsibilities beyond program.

ADJUSTED SESSION TIME: Some focus group participants and interviewees expressed challenges with making it to John Muir Elementary School in time for the start of the session. An adjusted time 4:00 pm - 6:00 pm could potentially encourage better attendance at weekly sessions and remove the commute rush as a reapplication deterrent.

MORE LONGITUDINAL CURRICULUM: Currently the curriculum is confined to a single session. Anthony Hernandez, a participant in his third session shared that he viewed each session as a single step and one of his motivations for reapplying was wanting to see out the full experience of three sessions. Tomicia Blunt, who only did a single session in Spring, 2015 but plans to return next Spring, also shared "I want to finish what I started". An option would be to adjust the BEETS curriculum so that it builds on the work of each session. Participants are encouraged to reapply to continue their learning and leverage their desire for a sense of accomplishment. This perception of each session as an installment of a complete program should still benefit participants who only complete one or two sessions.

STATED BENEFITS: When asked to share what some the benefits of reapplying are, focus group and interview participants referenced more money and more responsibilities but not the deeper level benefits of community building, or skill entrenchment and diversification. The Program Manager emails participants twice in program to encourage

reapplication to the subsequent session. This communication does not overtly state the soft skill benefits of doing another session, but rather focuses on activities, higher pay and increased responsibilities. The flyer below is a suggested alternative method of engaging participants to reapply to program. It shares the benefits of doing another session, including the pay and the skills.



REAPPLY!





More MONEY!

2nd Session = \$1124!

3rd Session = \$1174!



More FUN!

Next session, we'll do some fun things. For example, trips to (example1), (example2), and (example3)

Our theme for next session is (theme) and we'll learn more about issues like (1), (2), and (3)

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In the last session, you learned about (X), (Y), AND (Z). In the next session, we'll continue this theme AND start a new one - (theme!). We'll focus on (X) AND (Y) and learn about the impact this has on you and your community

JOB TITLES

- COMMUNICATIONS
- OPERATIONS
- ADVISORY COUNCIL
- GARDEN LEAD
- OUTREACH
- ADMISSIONS

JOB SKILLS

- LEADERSHIP
- TEAMWORK
- COMMUNICATION
- CRITICAL THINKING

don't delay!

"In any investment, you expect to have fun and make money"

—Michael Jordan



CONCLUSION

The BEETS program offers valuable skills for youth in a community that has historically struggled to incubate this development in the past. The program's model is structured around developing gardening skills and learning about food-related topics such as sustainable agriculture, drought management, and food justice. It also fosters transferable skills like leadership, collaboration, communication, and critical thinking. Research shows that programs such as this include benefits like empowering youth, increasing self-efficacy, and enhancing self-awareness and social achievement. Participants who apply for multiple sessions experience benefits for themselves but the program itself also benefits. Despite this, reapplication numbers are low and trending down. Returning participants are encouraged to reapply with more pay and responsibilities. Suggestions for increasing the rate of reapplication include adjusting the time of the program, adjusting the curriculum to spread across sessions, communicating the benefits of reapplying using alternative methods and increasing the responsibilities that participants adopt in subsequent sessions. These suggestions will be forwarded to the organization in the hope that they can be implemented and influence reapplication rates so the organization can achieve its mission and improve the service it offers to the community.

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