The Impact of Youth-led Organizations in Encouraging Physical Activity and Community Involvement

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Abstract

An experiential paper highlighting my involvement with Youth Opportunities Through Community (YOTC), a youth-led organization aimed at promoting physical activity and encouraging community involvement by establishing recreational skating camps to benefit youth.

Keywords: community involvement, recreation, youth
**Introduction**

Youth-led recreational programs can improve health and social outcomes in other young people while simultaneously expanding their skills and experiences. My involvement with Youth Opportunities Through Community (YOTC) has demonstrated the importance and impact of youth-led organizations in promoting community involvement and physical activity amongst other youth. YOTC began as an advocacy group, founded by like-minded high school students from Chinguacousy Secondary School in Brampton, Ontario in August 2009. Our organization was developed for the youth, by the youth, with hopes of engaging local middle school students in social and recreational activities that would facilitate physical activity and healthy decision-making from a health and community perspective.

The goals of the organization were to establish a mentorship network between participants and volunteers that would help instill positive values, encourage community involvement and promote physical activity. It would also make recreational programs available to underprivileged youth and help address the issue of equity and affordability in city programs. This paper describes my experiences as a volunteer for YOTC, starting with my involvement in the establishment and activities of this organization. It also includes details about some of the challenges that we faced and provides recommendations for future practical applications.

**Implementation and challenges**

YOTC launched its first Slice the Ice skating camp in 2009. Our camp engaged youth in a month-long instructional camp that offered participants the opportunity to learn how to skate at an ice rink free of charge. My involvement began during the development of the skating camp, volunteering alongside other students and teachers to reach out to local community centers and city groups. YOTC volunteers met regularly after school several times a week to organize, plan and coordinate the financial and logistical aspects of the program before its launch. We contacted and were able to secure some funding from Chinguacousy Secondary School and Brampton Safe City and applied for and received a Youth in Action grant from the United Way for Peel Region which altogether, covered the costs of the pilot program. The money from these grants was budgeted towards our planned expenditures which were comprised of rink rental fees, food and drink costs and equipment costs, including the purchasing of skates.
We also contacted local ice rinks and found days and times that were available for regular use each week. We organized for community leaders such as local police to visit during our camp and provide advice and guidance on topics such as bullying and inclusion. Community leaders also shared their stories and encouraged youth to play an active role in shaping their community. Our pilot program was successful in meeting the target of 40 participants and recruited over a dozen volunteers to help on and off the ice. Participants were selected on a first come, first served basis. We were successful in ensuring the participant group was diverse with respect to the age and gender of middle school children (grades 6-8) at our target school.

The major challenges that we faced as a youth organization included finding funding support, recognition and gaining the confidence from target schools. We were able to overcome these challenges with a clear proposal of the organization, which included an outline of how the program was to succeed in meeting goals. Support from school principals, teachers and individuals from Brampton Safe city and United Way of Peel region was also essential in helping us convey the program’s legitimacy and gaining the trust of the target school and the parents of participants.

**Personal Experience and impact**

Student volunteers, including myself, also served as instructors that aided youth in developing the fundamental skills, balance and technique needed to learn to skate. Volunteer instructors included members of Chinguacousy Secondary School’s ice hockey team, figure skaters and other students. Volunteers worked with participants in small group settings, helping them with putting on equipment, learning the skills needed for skating and motivating them to try their best. By working with the same group of kids regularly each week and witnessing the progress in their skating ability, participants developed a relationship based on trust, respect and appreciation with instructors that was evident by their enthusiasm in sessions throughout the camp.

YOTC was instrumental in facilitating social development and personal growth in both participants and volunteers. Volunteers had the unique opportunity to be involved in creating an organization with their own vision and under their own management and work towards the goals and objectives that they had targeted. Skating instructors benefited from this program by being able to share their skills and experience in a way that benefits the community. Volunteers who
helped with administrative tasks gained from the experience by developing leadership and social skills from their interactions with city groups and organizations. Networking with individuals from the city of Brampton helped volunteers learn about other opportunities for them to take advantage of. YOTC also served as a channel for civic engagement for volunteers interested in reducing the social and economic barriers that make it difficult for underprivileged families to partake in recreational programs. Personally, this was one of the reasons why I joined this organization. I wanted to share my passion for sports and recreation with other youth by ensuring that all those interested get the opportunity to participate in recreational activities regardless of financial limitations. For their dedicated efforts, volunteers and skating instructors also received community service hours which are essential for successful completion of high school. Volunteers that show potential to be driven community leaders now have the opportunity to share and reflect on their experiences by convening in meetings with other youth and organizations, including the Young Leaders Council. This allows them to share their story and successes to motivate others and also learn about new opportunities available to them.

Our program was especially beneficial for underprivileged youth because it gave them the opportunity to participate in recreational programs offered by the city free of charge. For many participants, this was their first exposure to organized sports outside of school. One of the initial goals of this organization was to help individuals that could not participate in organized sports programs because of their high costs. By recruiting many underprivileged participants that had not previously been involved in organized sports, our organization met our goal and identified the need for lowering the costs of city programs so that they would be more feasible options to lower income families. Strong interest and participation from low income families is evidence for the need of more affordable options so that youth have equal opportunities to engage in health, social and recreational programs.

In creating events like the skating camp for youth, irrespective of their fitness, experience, age, gender or their family’s financial status, our belief is that we can develop a passion for sports in all youth. Our hope is that this would help youth engage in a more active lifestyle and lead healthier lives by enjoying physical activity. Participants become more interested in activities when they are able to learn new skills or gain new abilities. Many of the participants from our pilot program developed an interest in ice skating by making progress
throughout the camp and developing an ability to skate. Furthermore, parents may be encouraged to enroll their children in organized sports, based on the positive feedback they receive from their children once they have had some exposure to recreational programs. We recognize that experiences like this can have a positive effect on the health of our youth by promoting physical activity and encouraging the formation of healthy habits from an early age.

The uniqueness of this organization is situated in its ability to use recreation as a medium to engage youth in physical activity in a setting that stimulates an interest in community involvement. Watching participants encourage each other helped us as volunteers realize our success in imparting the value of community and teamwork to participants. Based on the overwhelming positive feedback we received from parents, we were further motivated to continue pursuing the goals of YOTC and organize larger camps and multiple events throughout the year so that we could get more youth involved.

**Future applications**

YOTC is now in its sixth year of operation and has grown significantly since its launch. With passing years, the organization offers greater diversity in the types of activities that it offers participants. New teams of student volunteers are accredited with taking these next steps to advance the program. YOTC has spread to McGill University as a university-affiliated club. This organizational scheme can be successful if the specific needs and areas within a community can be identified. Through an understanding of the issues specific to the community, organization’s like these can be valuable mediums through which social issues can be brought up and discussed with youth in a welcoming environment within the presence of community leaders and activists. Securing consistent funding in the form of renewable grants is also essential to the growth and activity of this type of organization. Ultimately, through gaining a reputation for being a positive force in the community and with strong community and financial support, this type of organization can expand as a charity that is operated by youth leaders. As an advocacy group, it can also be used as a research tool to identify the extent to which financial limitations restrict youth participation in recreational programs.
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URL for YOTC: http://yotc.webs.com