Working With Youth

“A Study of Youth Worker Characteristics and Promotion of Youth Development”
Working with Youth

A Study of Youth Worker Characteristics and Promotion of Youth Development

REPORT

Date: October 2008

Authors:

William Evans, Ph.D., Professor of Human Development and Family Studies, State Specialist for Youth Development
University of Nevada Cooperative Extension

Eric Killian, M.S., Associate Professor
Youth Development Specialist
University of Nevada Cooperative Extension

Laura Davidson, Interdisciplinary Doctoral Program in Social Psychology
University of Nevada, Reno

Lorie Sicafuse, Interdisciplinary Doctoral Program in Social Psychology
University of Nevada, Reno

Design & Layout:
Lilian Blanchard, Administrative Assistant III
University of Nevada Cooperative Extension

The authors would like to acknowledge Deborah Loesch-Griffin, Ph.D. and Stephen Wilson, Ph.D. for their contributions to this project.

Copyright © 2008, University of Nevada Cooperative Extension
Using a web-based survey, this study examined the characteristics of individuals who work directly with youth in youth development programs and program staff administrators. Specifically, this study focused on identifying characteristics that may influence job satisfaction, intent to remain in the youth work field and self-reported competency in implementing the features of positive youth development. Results indicated that youth workers who reported higher levels of education, a specific post-secondary focus on youth development, and who reported living through experiences similar to the youth in their programs also displayed higher levels of self-reported job competency. Youth worker educational and professional development experience, compensation and benefits and characteristics of the youth worker’s organizations also were obtained. Implications for the recruitment, training and retention of youth workers, as well as directions for future research are discussed.
Out-of-School-Time Programs for Youth.................................................................................................................. 1
The Working with Youth (WWY) Survey Project........................................................................................................ 2
Method........................................................................................................................................................................ 3
Study Results.............................................................................................................................................................. 4
Level of Formal Education in Youth Development or Related Fields (Figure 1).................................................... 5
  Number of Years Program Staff Had Worked in Youth Programs (Figure 2)...................................................... 6
  Types of Out-of-School-Time Programs in Which Program Staff Reported Working (Table 1).............. 7
  National Organizations Represented in the Study (Table 2)................................................................. 8
Geographic Areas of Youth Programs (Figure 3).............................................................................................. 9
Percentage of Youth from “Low Income or At-Risk Backgrounds” Served by Program Staff (Figure 4)   10
Percentage of Ethnic Minorities in Staff’s Youth Programs (Figure 5).......................................................... 10
Frequency of Activities Performed by Program Staff (Table 3).......................................................... 12
Program Staff Approaches to Youth Work (Figure 6)...................................................................................... 13
Annual Salaries of Program Staff (Table 4)................................................................................................... 14
Youth Worker Employee Benefits (Figure 7).................................................................................................... 15
Agency Support of Program Staff Participation in Continuing Education (Table 5)...................................... 17
Staff’s Ratings of Changes Most Needed to Help Advance the Field of Youth Work (Table 6).............. 18
Self-reported Levels of Job Performance Competency (Figure 8).......................................................... 19
Self-reported Competency and Number of Years Working in Youth Programming (Figure 9)............ 20
Self-reported Competency and Level of Formal Education (Figure 10)...................................................... 21
Self-reported Overall Competency and Number of Youth Development Courses Taken During Post-secondary Education (Figure 11).................................................................................................................. 22
Self-reported Competency and Street Experience (Figure 12).............................................................. 23
TABLE OF CONTENTS (cont’d)

Page

Self-reported Competency and Helpful/Very Helpful Training Areas (Figure 13)................. 25
Factors Affecting Youth Workers’ Intent to Stay (Table 7)....................................................... 27
Administrators’ Level of Formal Education (Figure 14)
Number of Years Administrative Staff Had Worked in Youth Programs (Figure 15)............ 29
Administrators’ Reported Level of Job Satisfaction (Figure 16)............................................. 31
Administrative Staff Intent to Remain in the Youth Work Field (Figure 17)......................... 32
Limitations........................................................................................................................................... 33
Conclusion........................................................................................................................................... 34
References........................................................................................................................................... 38
In recent years, increased attention has been paid to the potential benefits that involvement in organized, out-of-school-time activities can have on youth’s physical, social and psychological development. Research suggests that youth involvement in out-of-school-time activities can reduce dropout (Mahoney & Cairnes, 1997) and problem behaviors (Pittman, Irby, & Ferber, 2001), and can increase positive academic outcomes (Marsh, 1992) and connection to school (Brown & Evans, 2002). These findings have led researchers to examine the characteristics of youth programs that help them effect positive developmental changes among participating youth. A comprehensive study of out-of-school-time programs conducted by Eccles and Gootman (2002) through the National Academy of Science revealed that the program environments most effective in promoting personal and social capital in youth provide:

1) physical and psychological safety; 2) appropriate organization and structure; 3) supportive relationships between staff and youth; 4) opportunities to belong; 5) positive social norms for youth to follow; 6) support for efficacy and mattering; 7) opportunities for skill building; and 8) integration of youth’s family, school and community efforts.

Although a large body of research has suggested that program staff are an integral component in creating a successful community-based youth program (McLaughlin, 2000; Walker, 2003; Yohalem, 2003), little research to date has examined the characteristics of youth program staff in implementing these eight features important to promoting positive youth development (Hartje, Evans, Killian, & Brown, 2008). Further, youth work as a profession has been described as an entry-level job with relatively high job turnover and little professional distinction (Thomas, 2002). The present study was designed as an effort to
better understand the characteristics of individuals who work with youth in out-of-school-time programs that might affect both their intention to stay in the youth work field and their ability to implement the positive features of their program’s design.

**The Working With Youth Survey Project**

This international, web-based study was conducted as a follow-up to the Working With Teens (WWT) survey administered in 2004. Both studies were developed to identify characteristics of frontline youth workers that might affect their job satisfaction, self-reported competency in implementing the positive features of youth programs and intention to remain in the field of youth work. Specifically, the studies examined youth workers’ educational backgrounds, training and previous job experiences as possible predictors of staff’s job satisfaction, retention and competency. Results gathered from the 2004 WWT report suggested a need for a follow-up study to further explore features of youth program climates (e.g., decision-making structure, employee benefits offered, opportunities for advancement and continuing education) and other characteristics of youth workers (e.g. staff’s perception of youth work as a field, most frequent job activities, theoretical approaches to working with youth) that might influence program staff’s job satisfaction and likelihood of remaining in the youth worker field.
Additionally, this current project (Working With Youth-WWY) opened the survey to youth workers in other countries, particularly in Canada and the United Kingdom. Another important feature of the WWY project was an additional survey for youth program administrators. This survey, although similar to the previous project (Working With Teens-WWT), focused on frontline youth workers and also examined the training, education backgrounds, previous job experiences, job satisfaction and retention of youth program managers and supervisors.

**METHOD**

**Survey Administration**

Data were collected via the web using surveymonkey.com, a web site through which researchers can post surveys on a user-friendly interface accessible through a link embedded in e-mail messages sent directly to youth workers and administrators. Surveys posted on this site are assigned individual web addresses, which helps to ensure that surveys are only accessible to program staff who have obtained the web address by the researchers or through their program listserves.

**Recruitment**

In total, more than 200 programs that serve youth were directly contacted by researchers between September 2007 and April 2008, resulting in responses from almost 100 different organizations in all 50 U.S. states, the District of Columbia and eight countries.

Following the pre-test, the first step in administering the overall survey to youth workers was to contact administrative representatives from these national organizations who were asked for their assistance in distributing the survey link to front-line program staff by either sending an e-mail message to their
listserves or providing their organizational e-mail lists to the researchers. Organizations also were provided an announcement containing the survey link to post on their organizations’ web sites. To augment distribution of the survey, a snowball sampling procedure was also used by asking each organization to provide contact information for other professional organizations with staff that would be eligible to participate in this study.

**RESULTS**

*Demographics*

Participants for this study were 764 adults, ages 18 years or older (mean age = 38 years), who work directly with youth in youth programs. In addition, 71 youth program administrators completed a parallel survey developed specifically for them.

Seventy-eight percent of the frontline youth workers who participated were female and 22 percent were male. Ethnic background was reported as follows: White/Non-Hispanic (75 percent); African-American (14 percent); Hispanic/Latino (5 percent); Multiethnic (3 percent); Asian/Pacific Islander (2 percent); Native American (1 percent).¹

Due to missing data, all results are reported in terms of valid percentages for individual items.

*Education*

Level of formal education, detailed in Figure 1, was reported by respondents as follows: High school diploma or GED (3 percent); some technical or vocational school (1 percent); technical or vocational school graduate (1 percent) community college degree or certificate (11 percent); some college (15 percent); bachelor’s degree (42 percent); master’s degree (26 percent); doctorate degree (2 percent). Nearly one-half of program staff (46 percent) said that much of their formal education was in youth development. When asked how much about their jobs they learned from more experienced staff members or colleagues, 53 percent said they had learned “much” or “very much,” 34 percent said, they learned “a little” and 13 percent said they learned “not much.”

¹ Due to standard rounding procedures, all percentages included in this report may not add up to 100 percent.
Figure 1. Level of formal education

- Doctorate
- Master's degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Some college
- Community college degree or certificate
- Technical or vocational school graduate
- Some technical or vocational school
- High school diploma or GED

Percentage of program staff
**Employment and Program Type**

Seventy-two percent of program staff reported being employed full-time, 19 percent were employed part-time and 8 percent volunteer their time in youth programs. Approximately one quarter of program staff (25 percent) had worked in youth programming for four to seven years (see Figure 2).
Employment and Program Type (cont’d)

The majority of respondents reported working for programs that occur both during-school-time and out-of-school-time (51 percent) or out-of-school-time (48 percent). One percent of program staff reported that their programs occur only during-school-time. Respondents who worked in programs occurring both during-school and out-of-school were equally likely to report that the during-school-time portion of their program focused on academic support (50 percent) and extracurricular activities (50 percent). The majority of respondents (84 percent) reported that youth in their programming participated for at least 7-12 months.

Table 1 indicates the types of out-of-school-time programs in which staff reported working. The five most represented types of programs were those that consisted of a combination of two or more types of programs (47 percent), before and after school programs (16 percent), community clubs (13 percent), juvenile justice related programs (7 percent) and drop-in teen centers (6 percent).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Program</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Combination of 2 or more types</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before and After School Program</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Club</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juvenile Justice Related Programs</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drop-in Teen Center</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer Program</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County/City Recreation</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizen Task Force/Involvement</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith-based Program</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Lessons/Activities</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 indicates the various national organizations that program staff represented. Approximately one-third of program staff (36 percent) worked in 4-H; 23 percent were from Boys & Girls Club; 18 percent of responses fell in the “other” category, which consists primarily of State Parks and Recreation Associations and various church groups; and 6 percent of program staff worked with Girls, Inc.

Table 2. National organizations represented in the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4-H</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys &amp; Girls Club</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (National &amp; State Parks &amp; Recreation, church groups)</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls, Inc.</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YMCA</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperative Extension</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big Brothers/Big Sisters</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coalition for Juvenile Justice</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girl Scouts</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alliance for Children &amp; Families</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Camp Association</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boy Scouts</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camp Fire</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communities in Schools</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Youth programs serve a broad range of needs in their local communities. Program staff reported that:

- 53 percent of their organizations served only children or youth, whereas 47 percent reported their organization served individuals of all ages.
- Almost one-half (49 percent) of program staff indicated that their program had a general focus, whereas 31 percent indicated that their programs were targeted (focused on an audience known to be at risk for specific issues). Additionally, 10 percent of program staff indicated that their programs were focused on high-risk youth (e.g., designed for audiences that already exhibit problems).

Figure 3 indicates geographic areas served by youth programs. Program staff were well distributed regarding the geographic areas in which they work, with 42 percent serving youth in urban areas, 25 percent working with youth in suburban settings and 33 percent working with rural youth.
Figure 4 shows the percentage of youth from “low income or at-risk backgrounds” served by youth programs. Nearly one-third (29 percent) of program staff said that a large majority (76 – 100 percent) of their program was made up of low income or at-risk youth. Figure 5 shows the percentage of youth from ethnic minority backgrounds served by program staff; 40 percent said that ethnic minorities comprised up to one-quarter of their programs.
Youth Worker Activities

The youth work profession involves a broad range of job requirements. To better gauge which tasks were most frequently employed in the field of youth work, program staff were given a list of possible youth work activities and asked to report whether or not they performed the activity as part of their job and whether they performed the activity each week or less than weekly. The four activities most often performed each week by program staff were: Managing/Directing the Overall Program, Planning Program Activities, Supervising Staff or Volunteers and Administrative Paperwork. The tasks least likely to be performed by program staff were Maintenance/Facilities Support and Transportation (see Table 3).
### Table 3. Frequency of activities performed by program staff

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Perform each week</th>
<th>Perform less than weekly</th>
<th>Not something I do in my job</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manage or direct overall program</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan program activities</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervise staff or volunteers</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative paperwork</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assist with program activities</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lead program activities</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community outreach/collaboration</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office/clerical support</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual support/counseling/mentoring of youth</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocacy on behalf of youth</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent/family involvement</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting with community officials</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting with youth leaders in your program/organization</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteer recruitment</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School outreach</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintenance/facilities support</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fundraising and development</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruit and hire staff</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Perspectives on Youth Work

Program staff were asked whether they took a Risk Prevention and Reduction approach to working with youth (identifying and reducing problems or high-risk behavior) or a Strengths-Based approach (community and youth development; resilience orientation; developmental assets). The majority of respondents (73.6 percent) indicated that they took a Strengths-Based approach towards working with youth in their program. Figure 6 diagrams these results.

Figure 6. Program staff approaches to youth work
Staff Wages and Benefits

Table 4 indicates the annual salary ranges of program staff. Nearly one-third (32 percent) of respondents reported earning between $30,001 and $40,000 annually for their youth work-related job; 26 percent reported earning $40,001 - $50,000; 16 percent reported earning $20,001 - $30,000; 9 percent reporting earning $50,001 - $60,000; and 10 percent of respondents reported an annual salary of $60,001 or above.

### Table 4. Annual salaries of program staff

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Annual Salary Range</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$0 - $10,000</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$10,001 - $20,000</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$20,001 - $30,000</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$30,001 - $40,000</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$40,001 - $50,000</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$50,001 - $60,000</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$60,001 or above</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In addition to questions regarding program staff’s salaries, respondents also were asked about other employee benefits they might receive in their youth worker positions. Figure 7 indicates the percentages of program staff who reported receiving each benefit. As the graph indicates, the employee benefits youth workers most frequently report having are Paid Vacation, Paid Sick Leave, Medical Insurance and Access to Computers. The least frequently reported benefits youth workers reported having were Reduced/Free Child Care and Unpaid Time Off for Training/School. Two hundred forty-five (245) youth workers responded that they received an hourly wage and four hundred eleven (411) youth workers responded that they received an annual salary.
**Previous Education and Training**

Program staff were asked to indicate what areas of employment they had previously worked in prior to their current youth work positions. Almost one-half of the respondents (49 percent) indicated that they had previously worked in education while another 30 percent of respondents indicated they had worked in social services.

**Staff Professional Development**

Program staff were asked a series of questions regarding their current professional development and continuing education as well as how well their program/organization supported their participation in professional development and continuing education classes. In general, the majority of program staff indicated that they had received some level of formal training and that their agency was largely supportive of their efforts. For example, when asked how many days within the last year program staff had participated in professional development efforts, 85 percent indicated that had participated in at least three or more days of professional development training (e.g. conferences, professional workshops, in-house training etc.) and 34 percent indicated they had spent 10 or more days in professional development efforts.

Similarly, only 12 percent of respondents indicated that their current agency did not actively support participation in continuing education. Almost 60 percent of respondents reported that their agency pays for at least some portion of their training fees. Table 5 describes these results in further detail.
Table 5. Agency support of program staff participation in continuing education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Agency Support</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agency pays training fees</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency provides on-the-job training</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency makes employees/volunteers aware of options</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency provides release time</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency formally recognizes/rewards years of experience</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency formally recognizes/rewards participation</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency formally recognizes/rewards higher education (bachelor's, master's, etc.)</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency formally recognizes/rewards certification</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency does not actively support participation</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Program Staff’s Perceptions of the Youth Worker Field

Program staff were asked to rank from a list which three changes to the youth work field would be most beneficial in helping to advance the profession. The majority of respondents indicated that raising overall compensation/wages (57 percent) would be most beneficial in helping to advance the youth worker profession. Increasing professional development opportunities was endorsed next by 39 percent of program staff. Table 6 further details these results.
Table 6. Staff’s ratings of changes most needed to help advance the field of youth work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change to Youth Work Field to Help Advance the Profession</th>
<th>% of Respondents Who Listed Change as the “Most Important”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Raising overall compensation/wages</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing professional development opportunities</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating a nationally recognized youth development/youth worker certification process</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public recognition of the youth work field</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More university-based degree programs</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clearer pathways for career advancement</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved workplace conditions/work environments</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Self-Reported Levels of Job Performance Competency

Results from the first youth worker survey, Working With Teens 2004, helped to develop and validate a measure for rating youth workers’ self-reported competency in providing positive program settings for youth. The 27-item survey categorizes youth program staffs’ self-reported job competency in maintaining a program environment which promotes: Physical and Psychological Safety, Adequate Program Structure, Supportive Relationships, Positive Social Norms, Developing Social Capital, Skill Building Opportunities and Social Integration of Family, School and Community. Responses were on a 10-point scale ranging from 1= “I am not good at this” to 10 = “I am extremely good at this.” Youth program staff reported their highest competency levels in providing settings that promote: 1) positive
social norms (e.g., ensuring that youth know how to behave properly in the program setting); 2) positive relationships between staff and youth; and 3) providing adequate structure within the program.

Respondents reported the lowest levels of competency levels in providing settings that promote: 1) positive social norms (e.g. ensuring that youth know how to behave properly in the program setting); 2) positive relationships between staff and youth; and 3) providing adequate structure within the program. Respondents reported the lowest levels of competency in their ability to: 1) provide program environments that promote building youth’s social capital (e.g. encouraging youth to give back to their communities and develop leadership skills); and 2) encourage social integration between the program and youth’s families, schools and local communities and other programs (Figure 8).
How does experience and education background relate to level of self-reported competency?

Past training, work experience, personal experience and level of formal education were compared to youth program staff’s levels of self-reported overall competency ratings. As seen in Figure 9, generally, as length of time worked increased, staff self-reported overall competency also increased.

**Figure 9.** Self-reported competency and number of years working in youth programming
Additionally, the level of formal education was compared to staff’s self-reported competency. Overall, youth program staff who reported having “some technical or vocational school” (n = 7) or having a “community college degree” (n = 75) rated their overall competency level as the highest in comparison to other formal educational backgrounds (see Figure 10).

Figure 10. Self-reported competency and level of formal education
Overall, competency was rated higher by program staff who said that “many” or “the majority” of courses taken during their post-high school education were specific to youth development in comparison to those who said that “none” or “very few” of their courses were related to youth development (see Figure 11).

**Figure 11. Self-reported overall competency and number of youth development courses taken during post-secondary education**
Additionally, youth program staff who reported that they brought “very much” street experience (i.e. life experiences similar to program youth) to their profession rated their overall competency higher than those who reported bringing “not much,” “a little” or “much” street experience to their profession (Figure 12).

**Figure 12. Self-reported competency and street experience**

![Bar chart showing self-reported competency and street experience](image)

**How much street experience do you bring to your profession?**

- Not much
- A little
- Much
- Very much

Composite Competency Score

-0.4
-0.3
-0.2
-0.1
0
0.1
0.2
0.3
Self-reported competency levels also were examined in regards to specialized youth work training program staff may or may not have received. Additionally, staff were queried on whether or not they had received training in the following topics, as well as how helpful they felt that training was:

- Youth safety issues within your program
- How youth develop over time
- Risk and protective factors
- Conflict management
- Team building
- Youth violence
- Substance abuse prevention/intervention
- Discipline/behavior management
- Diversity training
- How to manage a youth program
- How to conduct activities with youth
- Sexual-related issues
- Program evaluation and impact
- How to include community partners in your program
- The mission, the goals and the objectives of your program
- Staff support

In general, program staff who received training in the above areas and rated that the training was helpful or very helpful also rated their overall competency higher than those who had not received training at all or who reported that the training was not helpful or kind of helpful. In particular, program staff that rated their training in Youth Violence, Sexual-Related Issues and Staff Support (stress management, financial planning, career coaching) as helpful or very helpful reported the highest levels of overall competency (Figure 13). Program staff also most frequently rated these three areas, if they had not already had it as training that they would most like to receive.
Figure 13. Self-reported competency and helpful/very helpful training areas

- Conducting Activities
- Program Mission/Goals
- Youth Development
- Team Building
- Risk/Protective Factors
- Conflict Management
- Program Management
- Discipline/Behavior Management
- Diversity Training
- Youth Safety
- Program Evaluation
- Substance Abuse
- Community Integration
- Staff Support
- Sexual-related issues
- Youth Violence

Composite Competency Score
Overall, 82 percent of program staff reported that they were satisfied (41 percent) or very satisfied with their job (41 percent). Similarly, when program staff were asked how long they intended to stay in the field of youth work, only 8 percent intended to work in the field for two years or less and 55 percent reported that they intended to stay in the field for at least another six years. As expected, there is a strong relationship between intention to stay in the youth worker field and job satisfaction. That is, the higher program staff rated their current job satisfaction, the longer they intended to stay in the youth work profession.

Program staff were asked to rank in order of importance the three factors that would most affect their decision to continue working in the field of youth work. Table 7 details which factors were most frequently listed as the most important determinant in their decision to stay in the youth work profession. Of the options given, program staff most frequently rated “The fit between my personal interests, career opportunities and the field” and “A sense that my professional efforts are making a difference” as the single most important factors likely to affect their decision to remain in the youth work field. Overall, “Pay” was the most frequently ranked as one of staff’s three most important factors affecting their decision to stay in the field.
### Table 7. Factors affecting youth workers’ intent to stay in the youth work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>% of Respondents Who Listed Factor as the Most Important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The fit between my personal interests, career opportunities and the field</td>
<td>50.9% (n=144)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A sense that my professional efforts are making a difference</td>
<td>45.8% (n=151)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pay</td>
<td>33.9% (n=104)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The fit between the work hours/conditions and my lifestyle</td>
<td>26.2% (n=54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The opportunities for professional growth and development</td>
<td>23.1% (n=46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career stability</td>
<td>25.8% (n=31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduced stress levels associated with the work</td>
<td>23.9% (n=21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More supervision/support for my job</td>
<td>23.1% (n=9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee benefits</td>
<td>20.2% (n=24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having more input in program planning and direction</td>
<td>15.9% (n=10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More recognition</td>
<td>15.4% (n=4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data also were collected from program staff administrators. Respondents to the initial survey who indicated that their primary job responsibilities involved program staff supervision were redirected to a separate but similar survey designed to assess the characteristics of youth program administrative staff. Responses were obtained from program administrators in 35 states. Of the 71 (mean age = 42 years) administrators who completed the survey, 73 percent were female and 27 percent were male.

Ethnic background of program administrators was reported as follows: White/Non-Hispanic (79 percent); African-American (10 percent); Hispanic/Latino (4 percent); Multiethnic (4 percent); Asian/Pacific Islander (1 percent); Native American (1 percent).

**Administrative Staff Education and Experience**

Level of formal education was reported by administrators as follows (Figure 14): High school diploma or GED (3 percent); community college degree or certificate (4 percent); some college (15 percent); bachelor’s degree (33 percent); master’s degree (41 percent); doctorate degree (4 percent). When asked how much about their job they learned from more experienced staff members of colleagues, 54 percent of administrators said they learned “much” or “very much,” 29 percent said they learned “a little,” and 18 percent said they learned “not much.” Twelve percent of administrators indicated that they had “very much” street experience (having lived through experiences similar to the youth in their programs), 29 percent said they had “much” street experience, 42 percent said they had “a little” street experience and 17 percent reported that they had “not much.” Nearly one-third of administrative staff (32 percent) had worked in youth programming for 20 or more years (see Figure 15).
Figure 14. Administrators’ level of formal education

- High School Diploma or GED: 15%
- Some College: 3%
- Community College Degree or Certificate: 4%
- Bachelor’s Degree: 4%
- Master’s Degree: 33%
- Doctorate Degree: 41%

Figure 15. Number of years administrative staff had worked in youth programs

- < 1 year: 4%
- 1 year: 3%
- 2 years: 4%
- 3 years: 15%
- 4 - 7 years: 33%
- 8 - 11 years: 25%
- 12 - 19 years: 10%
- > 20 years: 4%
Program Type

The majority of administrative staff (69 percent) reported working for out-of-school-time programs; thirty-one percent said that their program occurred both during-school-time and out-of-school time. Sixty-four percent of administrators who worked for programs occurring during both times reported that the during-school-time portion of their program focused on academic support; 36 percent reported a focus on extracurricular activity. The focus of out-of-school-time programs of all administrative respondents was reported as follows: combination of two or more types of programs (35 percent); before and after school program (27 percent); other (12 percent); community club (11 percent); summer program (4 percent); county/city recreation (4 percent); drop-in teen center (3 percent); juvenile justice related programs (3 percent); and faith-based program (1 percent). The most common national organizations represented by administrative staff were Boys & Girls Club (42 percent), “other” youth-serving organizations (24 percent) and 4-H (8 percent).

Over one-half (53 percent) of all administrative staff reported that the youth they serve are mostly from urban areas, 30 percent said that their program serves youth from mainly suburban areas and 17 percent indicated that their programs serve mostly rural youth. Over one-third (38 percent) of administrative staff reported that 76 — 100 percent of their program was comprised of low-income or at-risk youth; and 29 percent said that 26 — 50 percent of the youth in their program were from ethnic minority groups.
Job Satisfaction

Figure 16 indicates administrative staff’s reported levels of job satisfaction. Over three-quarters (82 percent) of program administrators said that they were “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their job. Fifteen percent of administrative staff indicated that they were “somewhat satisfied,” and 3 percent reported that they were “not satisfied” with their job.

Figure 16. Administrators’ reported level of job satisfaction

Almost one-half (46 percent) of administrative staff reported that they intended to remain in the field of youth work for more than 6 years from now (Figure 17).
Figure 17. Administrative staff intent to remain in the youth work field

The bar graph illustrates the percentage of administrative staff by the number of years they intend to remain in the youth work field. The categories are:
- Not sure
- < 1 year
- 1 - 2 years
- 3 - 4 years
- 5 - 6 years
- > 6 years

The graph shows a significant increase in the percentage of staff intending to remain for more than 6 years, compared to those intending to stay for less than 1 year.
Administrative Staff Summary

A comparison of data obtained from administrative staff and program staff working directly with youth revealed that the characteristics of administrators are highly similar to the characteristics of those they supervise. Most notably, a large majority of both program staff and administrative staff reported that they were satisfied or very satisfied with their jobs and approximately one-half of the respondents from both groups reported that they intended to remain in the youth work field for more than 6 years from now. Administrative staff represented fewer states and national organizations than program staff; however, the small sample size of administrators obtained in this study limits the generalizability of our results. Future research endeavors should employ recruitment tactics that target a more diverse and larger sample of youth program administrators.

Limitations

Three primary limitations of the current study should be noted. First, some researchers have questioned the reliability and validity of web-based research methods, citing accessibility issues (Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, & John, 2004). Evans states because e-mail is the primary means of communication among youth-serving agencies; web-based surveys are highly accessible to most program staff (National Collaboration for Youth, personal communication, April 14, 2006). Second, although a diverse sample was obtained using Internet methods, our procedure does not eliminate the potential for selection bias. Those who completed the survey may be more involved in the youth work profession and dedicated to their jobs than the typical youth worker. Third, the present study uses self-reports rather than more direct measures of competency in implementing the features associated with positive youth development. Although self-reported competency may be highly predictive of ability, the potential exists for discrepancies among self-reported competency levels and actual behaviors. Future researchers may collect data regarding multiple perspectives of youth worker competency.
Conclusion

Numerous researchers have established a link between participation in youth programs and positive youth development (e.g., Benson & Pittman, 2001; Mahoney & Cairnes, 1997; and Perkins et al., 2003). Those responsible for the implementation of these programs play a critical role in this process (Huebner, Walker, & McFarland, 2003). Since youth work is often characterized as an entry-level position with low pay and a lack of professional distinction (Thomas, 2002), problems in the recruitment, selection and retention of qualified program staff continue to plague the field. Additionally, researchers have only recently begun to investigate the characteristics of youth workers and the relationships between these features and the promotion of positive youth development (Hartje, Evans, Killian, & Brown, 2008). The present study provides further insight into youth worker characteristics and their link to staff's self-reported competency in promoting the features of positive youth development identified by Eccles and Gootman (2002). Current results may be used to help guide and improve youth program staff recruitment and retention efforts and highlight the importance of youth worker professional development in ensuring the success of youth programs.
Conclusion (cont’d)

Consistent with the findings of Hartje et al. (2008), our analyses revealed that program staff who reported higher levels of formal education and who had lived through experiences similar to the youth in their program also displayed higher levels of self-reported competency in implementing the features of positive youth development. Further, results from the present study indicated a strong relationship between post-secondary focus on youth development and self-reported competency. Program staff who reported that the majority of their post-secondary courses were specific to youth development had significantly higher competency scores than staff who reported that none or very few of their post-secondary courses focused on youth development. However, 42 percent of program staff reported having little or not much street experience similar to program participants and over one-half indicated that very few or none of their post-secondary courses were specific to youth development. These findings provide direction to youth-serving agencies when recruiting and selecting youth workers and highlight the growing challenge of attracting candidates with the right education and experience to succeed in positions viewed as stepping stones to other, more prestigious and better paying jobs.
Conclusion (cont’d)

By investigating the training experiences of youth workers, the current study also identified specific training areas critical to program staff performance. Training in youth violence, sexual-related issues, staff support and community integration were the areas most strongly related to high self-reported competency levels. Interestingly, these were also the least common areas of training experienced by program staff and were rated as the ones they would most like to receive.

The development of positive interactions between program staff and the youth they serve requires a significant amount of time (Yohalem, 2003). Our finding that staff self-reported competencies tend to increase with the number of years spent working in youth programming further attests to the importance of staff retention in ensuring the quality of youth programs. However, retaining qualified staff is one of the most significant challenges facing the youth work field today (Hartje et al., 2008). Almost three-quarters of our sample had been in the youth work field for over 4 years, yet the majority of respondents reported earning an annual salary of $40,000 or less. Additionally, program staff
ranked “pay” as the third most important factor affecting their decision to remain in the youth work field. These findings support the contention that the high turnover rate in the youth work field may be attributable to inadequate compensation and lack of opportunities for professional advancement. These factors also contribute to lower prestige for the entire field of youth work.

The current study revealed that youth workers believed that increasing professional development opportunities, the creation of a nationally recognized youth development/youth worker certification process and more university-based degree programs would significantly advance the youth work field. Indeed, such changes would likely increase youth worker education levels, knowledge of youth development and perhaps, over time, youth worker compensation, thereby reducing youth worker turnover and enhancing self-competency in promoting positive youth development. Future research should further explore both the benefits of these recommendations and potential strategies regarding their development and implementation.

This study was supported by a grant from the USDA-CREES for Research Project #0637 through the Nevada Agricultural Experiment Station.


To download a copy of this report, please go to: http://www.unce.unr.edu/publications/