UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA •Reno

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

Bringing the University to You

Fact Sheet 99-32

Extracurricular Activity: How does participation encourage positive youth development?

Randy Brown, Ph.D. Area Extension Specialist
Children, Youth, and Family Team

Youth problem behaviors, such as truancy, violence, and substance use, are alarming to parents, teachers and youth alike. These behaviors disrupt the learning environment and lead to serious social and economic problems. Some experts have argued that rather than trying to prevent individual problem behaviors, parents, schools and communities should work towards building a youth's ability to resist the lure of problem behaviors (Dryfoos, 1990; Werner & Smith, 1992). As youth develop, they need positive settings that offer the opportunity to build these important internal resources (Hawkins & Weiss, 1985). Researchers and teachers have long suggested that extracurricular activity participation can be an important source of positive influence in the lives of youth (Holland & Andre, 1987). This Fact Sheet will explore how youth participation in extracurricular activities can encourage positive youth development.

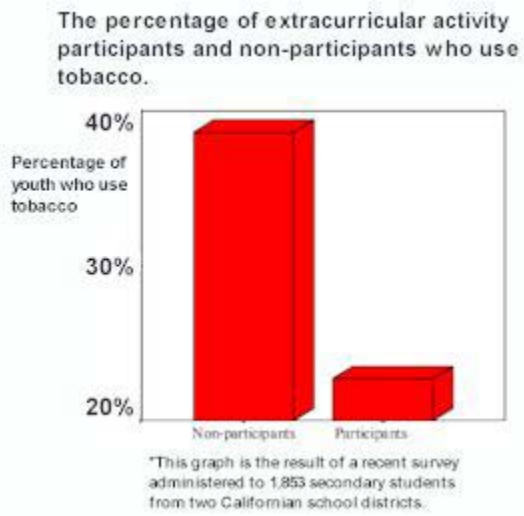
Extracurricular activity

Extracurricular activities are programs which fulfill two basic conditions: 1) they are not part of the regular school, curricular program; and 2) they are structured in some way (not just socializing, but working towards some prosocial mission or goal) (Holland & Andre, 1987). Extracurricular activities can include participation in clubs, student government, youth groups, etc. Some examples of extracurricular activities are: school band, 4-H club, church youth group, basketball team, French club, volleyball team, karate club, skate team, etc.

The benefits of youth participation in extracurricular activities

A considerable amount of research has examined the benefits of youth participation in extracurricular activities. This research has found that youth who participate in extracurricular activities are more likely to:

- Have better grades (Marsh, 1992);
- Have higher standardized test scores (Gerber, 1996);
- Have higher educational attainment (Hanks & Eckland, 1976);
- Attend school more regularly (Mahoney & Cairns, 1997);
- Have higher self-concepts (Marsh, 1992).



Youth who participate also have been found to be less likely to:

- Use substances (Cooley, Henriksen, Nelson & Thompson, 1995);
- Dropout of school (Mahoney & Cairns, 1997);
- Misbehave at school (Marsh, 1992);
- Commit delinquent acts (Landers & Landers, 1978).

An illustration of this relationship can be seen:

Clearly, there are many factors that contribute to shaping how a youth behaves. It appears from the research, however, that participation in extracurricular curricular activities could be one protective factor that might prevent a youth from being involved with problem behaviors.

How does extracurricular participation positively influence youth?

Researchers have offered several explanations as to why youth who participate in extracurricular activities seem to be more successful. Some authors have explained that youth who participate in activities learn important skills which help them in other aspects of their life, for example, teamwork, or leadership skills (Holland & Andre, 1987). Others have argued that just spending time participating in an extracurricular activity decreases the opportunity for a youth to be involved with problem behaviors (Carnegie, 1992). For example, research has found that youth who are involved in prosocial activities from 2-8 p.m. are less likely to commit or be a victim of a crime (Sickmund, Snyder & Poe-Yamagata, 1997).

Still other researchers have suggested that as youth participate in extracurricular activities they are influenced both by the culture of an activity and the experiences they have as a part of that activity (Marsh, 1992). This social environment influences a youth's values and how he/she perceives things. In the case of most extracurricular activities, the environment is a prosocial one which encourages prosocial values and behavior (see below). For example as a youth participates in student government, he or she learns more about the importance of going on to college. He/she learns that discussion can be a way of resolving problems. All of these things influence his/her values about violence or whether or not to attend college.

How activity participation encourages positive behavior.

What makes a good extracurricular activity?

These are several signs of a good extracurricular program:

- Youth feel like they are a part of a group or something special.
- Youth have the opportunity to develop relationships with adults and prosocial peers.
- The program has goals that encourage youth and staff to achieve great things, while also having rules that hold participants accountable to certain standards.
- Youth can take on leadership roles. For example, having a committee of youth organize a social event.
- The program is appropriate for the age group. For example, having activities that are not too difficult for younger children or "uncool" for teenagers.
- The program involves parents and peers.

Most importantly, though, extracurricular activities have to be fun and attractive for youth. Often the best judges of this are youth themselves. Youth need to be a part of deciding how a program is organized and conducted.

At a time when many youth are at risk for involvement in problem behaviors, youth and adults need to work together to develop positive sources of influence for youth. Extracurricular activities can be one of these sources. These activities, however, have to be organized carefully to be appealing and engaging to youth.

References

- Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development. (1992). A matter of time: Risk and opportunity in nonschool hours. Washington, DC: Author.
- Cooley, V., Henriksen, L., Nelson, C., & Thompson, J. (1995). A study to determine the effect of extracurricular participation on student alcohol and drug use in secondary schools. Journal of Alcohol and Drug Education, 40, 71-87.
- Dryfoos, J (1990). Adolescents at risk: Prevalence and prevention. NY: Oxford University Press.
- Gerber, S. (1996). Extracurricular activities and academic achievement. Journal of Research and Development in Education, 30, 42-50.
- Hawkins, J., & Weis, J. (1985). The social development model: An integrated approach to delinquency prevention. Journal of Primary Prevention, 6, 73-97.
- Holland, A., & Andre, T. (1987). Participation in extracurricular activities in secondary school: What is known, what needs to be known? Review of Educational Research, 57, 4347-466.
- Landers, D., & Landers, D. (1978). Socialization via interscholastic athletics: Its effects on delinquency. Sociology of Education, 51, 299-303.
- Mahoney, J. & Cairns, R. (1997). Do extracurricular activities protect against early school dropout? Developmental Psychology, 33, 241-253.
- Marsh, H. (1992). Extracurricular activities: Beneficial extension of the traditional curriculum or subversion of academic goals? Journal of Educational Psychology, 84, 553-562.
- Sickmund, M., Snyder, H. & Poe-Yamagata (1997). Juvenile offenders and victims: 1997 update on violence. Pittsburgh PA: National Center for Juvenile Justice.
- Werner, E. & Smith, R. (1992). Overcoming the odds: High-risk children from birth to adulthood. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA RENO	The University of Nevada, Reno is an Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action employer and does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, age, creed, national origin, veteran status, physical or mental disability, or sexual orientation, in any program or activity it operates. The University of Nevada employs only United States citizens and those aliens lawfully authorized to work in the United States.