

“Acorns to Oaks”

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Michaela LeMay, Clayton Sipiora, & Rashad Dudley
Clemson University Youth Development and Leadership
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Dr. Edmond Bowers
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Introduction

“Acorns To Oaks” allows youth to engage with their community through annual events and activities hosted at their local green spaces. These events and activities connect youth and their families with local city and county parks. Our mission is to promote discovery and exploration in nature for the youth served by offering free environmental education and community-building programs and providing a safe and fun place to play. Youth and families enjoy a schedule of activities and events, including cultural celebrations, and the program acts as a laboratory for youth to develop leadership roles in their community. Initially, the organization produces a set of activities, outreach, and coordination; through youth-driven discussions and leadership development, youth and adults from the community take over program planning and development. The program develops community while empowering youth to become voices and leaders from within and for those closest to them.

Needs

Studies have shown that engagement with the natural world can lead to positive youth development (Brown et al., 2011; Wells & Lekies, 2006; Kellert, 2002). Browne et al. (2011) found that youth engagement with nature can exhibit leadership skills, help grow confidence, aid in cognitive development, and contribute to core memories for youth. Wells and Lekies (2006) found that increased exposure to outdoor settings significantly improves youth's mental health and promotes positive youth development. Exposure to the outdoors is fundamental for social and emotional development in middle-aged youth (Kellert, 2002). To reap the benefits of nature, youth need to have access to nature, and Larson et al. (2011) found that 27.7% of youth need more convenient access, and 20.7% of youth need transportation. The need to create “Acorns to Oaks” stems from providing youth access to nature for themselves and their families to

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participate in the abovementioned benefits. It is vital to incorporate families, guardians, and caregivers into these days to facilitate familial bonding, and it has been shown to yield higher success in the youth utilizing programs (Terzain et al., 2009). The gaps we will be addressing are eliminating the lack of access and transportation currently posing as a barrier to youth to access parks and providing that for them, along with activities.

The program will help foster community relationships and youth's sense of belonging. To promote positive youth development, programs must allow youth to feel like they belong, incorporate family, schools, and community, and facilitate positive adult relationships (Mahoney et al., 2005). This program will tie together county and city parks with local schools. It will then incorporate families and bring together the community to work together to create a program day planned by their local youth. Combined with utilizing the natural world, this program will promote youth connection with nature and its positive benefits and help facilitate many features of positive youth development, as listed by Mahoney et al. (2005).

Participants

The program intends to engage youth between the ages of 5-13 from school districts with large concentrations of students from low SES. Looking at schools in the communities that meet state standards for free meals, breakfast, and lunch and who are more than a two-mile from public green space. In addition, the program intends to target their families and local community members to promote a positive and inclusive environment.

Program Goals

“Acorn To Oaks” sets goals that work as a ladder to lead a community to self-sufficiency in programming; the goal is for a community to run the program and have community members staffing each level of the organization that facilitates the program. The first goal is to gain

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participation. Without individuals showing up for the program, there is no program; after initial participation, retention, and program engagement are hoped to be achieved. We hope to utilize the benefits offered by the outdoors to facilitate community growth.

The development of a youth council that aids and leads programming is a core component of the “Acorn to Oaks” program, and a program goal is to have a fully developed and participating youth council within the first year of the program. The youth council will facilitate the following goals: increased youth participation in their community, development of leadership skills, increased self-confidence and problem-solving, and a building of youth involvement in positive community goals and relationships (Mahoney et al., 2005).

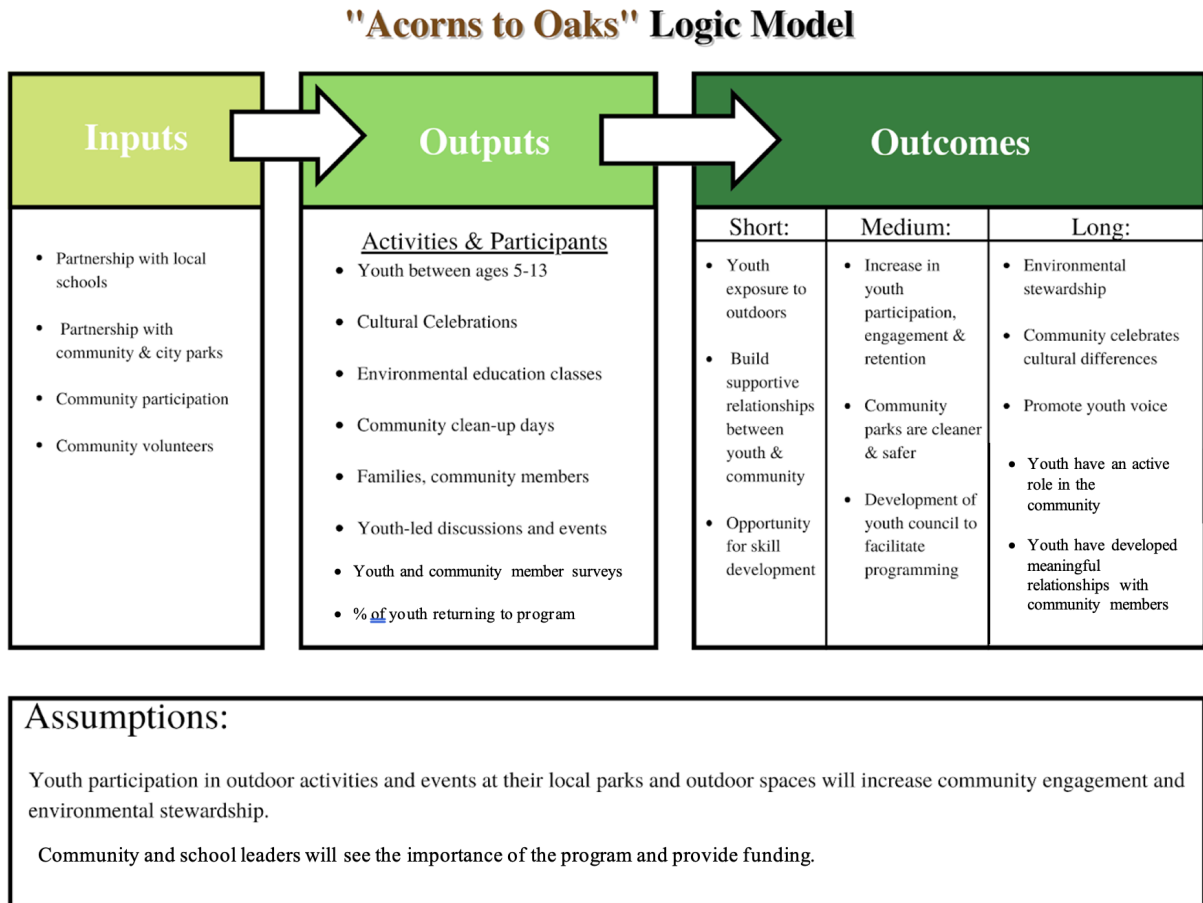
With community participation and a flourishing youth council, there will be a drive for regular meetings and involvement from the community; this will ultimately become a mode for the community to take control of the program. Youth intended goals are retention and engagement by facilitating a sense of belonging, skill-building activities, and cross-connecting family, school, and community (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Leadership development stems from the youth council and their voice within the program that will make a difference in their communities (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Continued involvement in the program will pave the way for youth to become contributing members of their communities and help facilitate leadership and problem-solving skills (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

Community goals will include cleaner parks, neighborhoods, and communities as youth develop a place and passion for community involvement (Mahoney et al., 2005). The community will learn to share in their different cultures and celebrate their differences with supportive relations creating a positive youth development environment (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). This

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program aims to create a united community that utilizes youth voices, their perspectives, and the ideas they have to create a safe place for all (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

Logic Model



Partnering with local schools, parks, and the community will be needed to facilitate the program. The schools will connect to youth and allow for the use of school buses for transportation. Parks will provide a safe space for the program to occur, and the community will assist with fostering youth opportunities to be involved. These partnerships will also provide the funding for the program and be the network for establishing volunteers to assist in running the program.

Targeted youth will be aged 5-13, including familial involvement to increase participation (Terzian et al., 2009). Local members of the community will be invited to join and increase

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relationship-building and youth involvement. Activities will include cultural celebrations, clean-up, and environmental education. Youth will build a council to start leading the planning and implementation of the program. Surveys and youth retention will be taken for evaluation.

Short-term outcomes will be to expose youth to the natural benefits of the outdoors (Kellert, 2002). While youth participate in the activities, they will learn new skill sets through the different activities offered (Mahoney et al., 2005). Youth will establish relations with their community and its members by working together to plan the program and improve their community (Mahoney et al., 2005).

Medium-term outcomes include engagement and retention of youth participants. The relationships built during short-term goals will help facilitate a sense of belonging for youth in the community and bring them back to the program (Mahoney et al., 2005). Continued clean-up days will allow local parks and the community to stay clean. The development of the youth council will provide youth a platform for a voice in the program and strengthen their leadership skills by taking over the program (Mahoney et al., 2005).

Long-term, youth will have active roles in their communities because they develop a meaningful connection with it and understand they have a place of belonging and voice. The community will recognize and celebrate cultural differences, increasing the community's safety for youth (Mahoney et al., 2005). Youth will develop environmental stewardship by connecting with their local community and the outdoors (Browne et al., 2011).

We assume that the community, schools, and parks will fund the program and that it will increase community engagement and environmental stewardship.

Marketing

The “Acorns to Oaks” marketing strategy will utilize the four P’s to develop a marketing mix strategy (Diem, 2008). Local youth on the council will plan activities, events, and

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promotions. The program incorporates familial involvement to increase the odds of youth participation (Terzian et al., 2009). There will be various activities for youth to participate in, not limiting them to only a few choices, hopefully engaging more youth during the day (Terzian et al., 2009). Community relationships will aid in providing youth with a sense of belonging, facilitating a positive development quality (Mahoney et al., 2005). The program's cost will be free to participants and funded by the community to ensure full access by local youth and their families. Transportation will be provided free of charge to maximize inclusion.

The program will be run, for the majority, by community volunteers. Volunteers will be recruited utilizing the community's needs for facilitating youth involvement in nature and the community (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Using direct verbal outreach from staff, the school and park volunteer communities will be asked to participate in the "Acorns to Oaks" programs because they already have cared for their organizations (Terzian et al., 2009). Flyers will be posted at local hot spots, including grocery stores, community centers, and libraries. Social media posts will be created on the school's and park's pages to recruit volunteers through Facebook and Instagram. The program will try to refrain from using guardian volunteers and members of the youth's families so that they will experience the day as participants.

Youth recruitment will come from various areas to target them and recruit their families. The youth council will design flyers and social media posts and plan a program pitch for parents at different school night activities. Flyers will be posted in schools and around the community and sent home with every youth from the school. Social media posts will be made for Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and Twitter. Various social media posts are being made to incorporate youth and their parent's use of these platforms. The posts will be put onto the school's social media and the city/county parks' social media, and youth participating will be allowed to post them. Youth

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recruiting other youth and their families is the primary goal to increase youth participation in the program (Terzian et al., 2009). Youth will also create a pitch to give at school events, including sports, music performances, back-to-school nights, and others, to increase face-to-face time about the program and allow room for questions from their communities (Terzian et al., 2009).

7. Evaluation Plan

The process evaluation will determine if the program implication is going as planned and if the program needs to be adapted (Iachini et al., 2014). The program will occur monthly; on each “Acorns to Oaks” day, the number of youth will be recorded, and after the first program, the percentage of returning youth will be recorded. We will also record youth participation in the activities and see what percentage of total youth in attendance engage in the activities provided. We will utilize census data to see what percent of the population is in attendance by comparing total “Acorns to Oaks” attendance to city/county populations.

Outcome evaluations will allow program leaders to determine whether the program's intended outcomes are being met (Weiss et al., 2020). Surveys will be distributed to youth in attendance at the end of each program. Surveys will ask youth about their experience during the program, including questions: How did you connect with other members of the community during your program?, please explain how this program changed your views on your role in the community and what benefits did you observe or experience having this program in local parks? Community members in attendance will also be asked to complete a survey. Their survey will target their views and feelings on how youth engaged with them during the program, whether they see a difference in community goals and workings, and if they felt relationships were being established and built with youth during the program.

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Another route to take with outcome evaluations would be distributing a similar survey that youth take to youth who need to utilize the program. This would be a comparative data set to see if they are reaching the goals set by the program or successfully establishing the intended meaningful connections (Weiss et al., 2020).

Conclusion

In conclusion, “Acorns to Oaks” will be a program that aids youth in becoming contributing members of their communities by utilizing an outdoor space and setting. The program will allow youth to foster meaningful relationships with adults, build life skill sets, and develop their voice and confidence through various activities (Mahoney et al., 2005). “Acorns to Oaks” will foster positive youth development while fostering outdoor connections.

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