



engaging library partners in 4-H programming

by Nia Imani Fields and Elizabeth Rafferty

When most people think about 4-H, they remember county fairs, livestock programs, and agricultural education. While these programs are still prominent, 4-H has grown in order to meet the growing demands of today's youth. The organization has expanded services and programs to serve rural, suburban, and urban youth in every state in the country.

4-H is uniquely positioned to apply youth development research, through non-formal education and technical assistance, directly from universities to local individuals, families, and communities. 4-H offers an array of research-based, experiential learning opportunities in science, citizenship, and healthy living, using various delivery modes. One of these, 4-H Afterschool, is growing in the University of Maryland Extension. 4-H Afterschool provides opportunities for youth to engage in positive youth development and to build life skills during the afterschool hours.

Similarly, when most people think of libraries, they think of checking out books. However, “[t]he public library can—and should—be a central hub for community life, not just a place to borrow books” (Bourke, 2007, p. 138). Though books and literacy programs are still at the forefront of the library's purpose, libraries also partner with local organizations to provide youth development programs. The Baltimore County Pub-

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lic Library system in Maryland hosts a large number of youth who frequent the library to use the computers and resources as well as to participate in ongoing youth programs. Parents view the library as a safe place for young people to meet during out-of-school time to engage in educational and youth development activities.

Baltimore County 4-H and the Baltimore County Public Library (BCPL) are thus natural partners in meeting the needs of youth after school. In Maryland in 2009, 37 percent of youth—up from 27 percent in 2004—said that they would participate in an afterschool program if one were available (Afterschool Alliance, 2009). Recognizing the need for quality youth development programming after school, Baltimore County 4-H and the BCPL forged a partnership to offer structured experiential programming opportunities to meet the afterschool needs of youth who visit their local library. This partnership is now in its fifth year, representing the longest continual relationship between BCPL and a youth-serving organization. Our experience suggests that libraries and youth development organizations can fruitfully collaborate to create sustainable quality afterschool programming that meets youth and community needs.

Youth Development in the Library

Libraries often partner with community agencies to foster youth development. Researchers note that, while libraries might want to provide youth development programs, their staff generally do not have the expertise and must look outside the library for help with this goal. Bourke (2005, 2007) and Burnett and Spelman (2011) have described library-community partnerships in Australia. The Institute of Museum and Library Services (2007) recommends that libraries partner with community agencies to fill in gaps in service. Bosma, Sieving, Ericson, Russ, Cavender, and Bonine (2010) outline elements necessary for successful inter-agency partnerships. In this article, we outline the specific methods used to sustain the partnership between the BCPL and the Baltimore County 4-H program, a kind of partnership that can be replicated in other library environments.

Forging the Partnership

Afterschool programming in libraries reaches youth where they are. Youth come to the library because it is a safe place to be after school. They like to use the comput-

ers and resources and to participate in youth programs, if they exist. In addition, libraries are logical venues for afterschool programming because they have ongoing relationships with schools, home school groups, and community organizations. These relationships offer not only subject support, but also “industry knowledge, networks, funding,” which are “absolutely invaluable” (Burnett & Spelman, 2011, p. 28). Library branches have the capability to advertise the program, for instance, in their county-wide newsletter, on the library website, and through intercom announcements informing youth about afterschool program sessions. These benefits can be shared with program providers, leading to further program collaboration, joint marketing, community service opportunities, and access to additional funding streams—all adding up to sustainability.

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In 2006, there was a recognized need to increase both the diversity of participation in Baltimore County 4-H and the variety of 4-H programming opportunities in Baltimore County’s urban and underserved communities. In collaboration with other county extension educators, Baltimore County 4-H conducted an assessment of Baltimore County communities to identify the neighborhoods that most needed youth programming. Meanwhile, BCPL, experiencing an increase in teen users after school, was looking to provide pro-social, constructive activities for these young people. Using the youth development principle of viewing youth as resources rather than as problems or service recipients (Whitlock, 2004), BCPL conducted an afterschool needs survey of youth who were attending library branches. This survey of 122 youth ages 10–19 identified areas of interest to these youth (English, 2006). The top areas were finding a job, video games, computer games, and poetry.

Based on these and other community assessments, Baltimore County 4-H and BCPL established two pilot teen afterschool programs. The Rosedale and Randallstown libraries were chosen as the pilot sites because they had large numbers of teens present after school and high levels of support among library staff. The 4-H afterschool program 4 Youth, By Youth was launched in 2006 with the assistance of a \$1,000 mini-grant from the Maryland 4-H Foundation. These funds covered program materials, curricula, and healthy snacks for the youth. Since the program’s inception, additional grants were awarded by the Baltimore County Local Management Board (LMB), a county entity that fosters interagency coordination to

address the well-being of children and families. The LMB provided \$250,000 per year in the first two years and \$147,000 in the third year to implement 4-H and other afterschool programs in BCPL. With a portion of these funds, a teen program assistant was hired and trained to implement 4-H and other youth programs in local libraries.

The afterschool program was broken into four program segments: workforce readiness, science, nutrition, and community engagement and leadership. Each two-month program segment was conducted during weekly or monthly sessions; the timing was largely dependent on funding and staffing. Over the years, 4 Youth, By Youth has been led by 4-H educators, trained library staff, volunteers, and college interns.

Sustainability through Collaboration

An identified program goal for both Baltimore County 4-H and BCPL was to strengthen and sustain community partnerships while offering quality afterschool programs in Baltimore County. Whitlock (2004) points out that youth development programming has to “accompany youth throughout their development to be effective” (p. 3). Creating developmentally attentive cultures through sustained and broad collaboration across all community sectors is what makes youth development powerful (Whitlock, 2004). Both partners realized that, if we worked together to combine program resources and strengths, the impact of our initiatives would be far greater than if we worked alone. What BCPL brings to the afterschool partnership is facilities, youth participants, and librarians. 4-H contributes research-based curricula, staff training, university 4-H educators, and additional resources from the University of Maryland. The benefits to the library are increased numbers of replicable, quality youth development programs in the branches; new potential young library patrons; and new funding sources. The 4-H program benefits by increasing the number of community partnerships and youth programs and by training additional youth development facilitators. Increasing the number of trained facilitators allows a 4-H program to multiply its efforts and reach a larger audience of young people.

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Strategies for Sustainability

Baltimore County 4-H and BCPL used several key strategies to promote sustainability:

- Clear and ongoing communication between partners
- A replicable program providing quality, research-based curriculum in areas identified by youth
- Ongoing training in 4-H strategies and content for program leaders
- Diverse funding streams

The partnership between Baltimore County 4-H and the BCPL Youth Services division began with a statement of understanding that clearly communicated the partners’ roles and responsibilities. This communication was further enhanced by quarterly meetings that focused on identifying program strengths, challenges, and future goals.

While the program has changed over the last four years to address current identified needs and interests of the youth, the use of experiential and research-based curricula—a hallmark of 4-H programming—has remained constant.

4-H offers an array of innovative materials for both youth and youth practitioners. These resources make the program adaptable to the needs and interests of youth in the community. The program can be replicated by any organization that has access to 4-H curricula and program materials as well as the interest of youth and of adult leaders, whether they are volunteers, college interns, or staff. 4-H curricula lend themselves to program replication because the experiential, research-based lessons follow a lesson plan model

that almost any willing adult can easily facilitate after being trained by a 4-H educator or trained volunteer.

Training of Baltimore County librarians was an important component of our sustainable partnership. 4-H Youth Development offered training countywide as a means of increasing the interest of library branch staff in the afterschool program and then giving them the skills and knowledge they needed to lead a quality youth program. Training topics included:

- Trainees’ work styles and how to fit into a team
- The power of youth development
- Afterschool program management
- Age-appropriate practices
- Guidance and discipline
- Teen leadership

Implementing this training helped library staff go from “being nervous participants to becoming in some cases passionately involved with young people in the collaborative development of library programs” (Burnett & Spelman, 2011, p. 28).

Like most ongoing programs, 4 Youth, By Youth had to adapt to changes in funding availability through the years. In addition to the Maryland 4-H Foundation grant and the LMB grant, we have asked library branches that want to continue the program to help support salaries for program facilitators.

Meeting the Library’s Needs

Since the library and 4-H have different missions, the collaboration needed to emphasize similarities and to cope with differences through compromise. While the mission of 4-H is youth-focused, the library’s scope is much larger; it provides materials, information, and services to community members of all ages. Therefore, though BCPL was a willing partner with 4-H in providing afterschool programming, the program needed to fit into the library’s mission.

Three things that motivate libraries are “door count”—the number of people who walk in—materials circulation, and a quiet environment on the public floor. 4 Youth, By Youth was a natural supporter of these goals. An afterschool program, like other community programs held in the library, can encourage new users to come to the library and inspire current users to come in more often. Circulation was

encouraged when librarians would pull materials relating to the program’s current subject matter for display. The issue of providing an environment conducive to reading and quiet study is problematic for many urban libraries, which are experiencing an influx of teens after school that is proving disruptive to normal library service. Providing structured programs in meeting rooms meets youths’ need for a safe place to gather after school while engaging them in constructive activity off the main floor of the library. The afterschool program can also help teens to feel connected to their library, so they may be less disruptive during non-program times.

Outcomes and Impacts

The 4 Youth, By Youth afterschool program is the longest-running teen afterschool program in BCPL in the last 10 years. The goal was to reach an audience of 10–15 youth per site each year, a number that would allow us to keep a 1:15 adult-to-youth ratio. At the two program sites, the number of participants ages 11–18 has increased from 15 in 2006 to 21 in 2010. Similar program models have also been adapted with other Baltimore County 4-H partners to reach an additional 330 youth ages 8–18 in afterschool programs between 2006 and 2010. This program has contributed to the increased diversity of participants in Baltimore County 4-H, as shown in Table 1.

Through the years, data have been compiled from pre- and post-participation surveys, class observations, and end-of-class surveys. Table 2 highlights two key outcomes from 2006.

Table 1. Baltimore County 4-H Program Participants

RACE/ETHNICITY	BALTIMORE COUNTY 4-H MEMBERSHIP (2006)	BALTIMORE COUNTY 4-H MEMBERSHIP (2010)
White	96%	66.5%
African American	0.9%	27.5%
Asian	1.1%	2.7%
Native American	0.9%	0.6%
Pacific Islander	0.2%	0.1%
Hispanic	1.1%	1.5%

Source: Baltimore County 4-H Enrollment System (2006–2010)

Table 2. Youth Perception of Effects of 4 Youth, By Youth (n=13)

STATEMENTS		AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISAGREE
I feel like I can make a difference in my community.	PRE	66%	17%	17%
	POST	78%	15%	7%
I am aware of community resources, and I can utilize them.	PRE	82%	9%	9%
	POST	93%	0%	7%

After the first year of programming, the 4-H educator realized that surveys at the beginning and end of the program year were difficult to synthesize because participation fluctuated and new teens began to attend throughout the program year. The evaluation was then changed to survey participants at the beginning and end of program segments. End-of-program-segment surveys between 2008 and 2010 showed that youth reported increased knowledge in workforce readiness, science, nutrition, community engagement, and leadership.

The program has been well received by youth, parents, and library staff. In a project in which youth developed promotional tools for the 4-H afterschool program, one teen wrote, “Learn healthy snack recipes such as an egg sandwich and burritos. You’ll even prepare it and try it!” Another said that “4-H was really great this year. We learned about inventors of safety devices, science experiments, and communication.” A librarian who facilitated the 4 Youth, By Youth program shared her view:

It is clear that the youth benefit just from having an adult they can relax with and sort of “check in” with each week. Housing the program at the library is also a great way for the teens to connect with the library staff!

Library branches are often eager to replicate successful programs held at another library branch. The 4 Youth, By Youth 4-H afterschool program has most recently been replicated in the Arbutus branch in Baltimore County for the 2010–2011 school year. In addition to increased participation in the library 4-H afterschool program, we have seen increased interest and participation in youth development training from library staff throughout central Maryland and from community partners such as Big Brothers, Big Sisters of Central Maryland. In 2009, the 4-H educator successfully

trained 29 Central Maryland librarians representing 4,030 library youth. The goals were to provide youth development training to librarians that would enhance current youth programs being held in the branches, to provide resources that would allow librarians to better serve youth who visit the branch, and possibly to spark interest in expanding the 4-H program in the county. Evaluations showed that librarians perceived an improvement in their knowledge of program management. Specifically, they enhanced their skills in the areas of positive youth development, age-appropriate practices, positive guidance and discipline, parents as partners, and leadership. They also increased their awareness of ways to communicate with young people and learned how to establish a youth program in a library branch.

Lessons Learned

In the course of providing a successful program, we learned some lessons about teen afterschool programming. When we had to cut back from weekly to monthly offerings during a low budget cycle, we learned that monthly programming can work, but weekly is more effective. We also learned that teens typically lost focus after 90 minutes of learning. Outreach efforts increased the chances of steady attendance throughout the year. We used e-mails, on-site signage, and reminder calls to keep youth coming. Most importantly, it has been crucial to remain current to meet the growing and changing needs and interests of our youth.

In addition to lessons related to programming, we have also learned about sustaining our partnership. Library staff who are not directly involved in the 4-H afterschool program need to be able to encourage young patrons to attend the program during their regular interactions with the youth. To that end, BCPL informs each participating branch about the program by conducting meetings and

providing a fact sheet along with 4-H registration information. Furthermore, though each librarian is equipped to encourage participation in the 4-H program, the BCPL Youth Services department has also identified a liaison for each branch who communicates directly with the 4-H educator and BCPL Youth Services. This system has enhanced communication about the 4-H program in the branches.

Perhaps the greatest lesson we learned is that youth programs are continually evolving and thus need to be flexible—and not only in terms of programming. Library-based youth development programs also need to be able to adapt to changes in funding, staffing, research, youth interests, and community needs.

Making Collaboration Work

Providing sustainable quality afterschool programs that meet youth and community needs requires a collaborative effort. Baltimore County 4-H and BCPL have successfully forged a lasting partnership to engage and develop youth in Baltimore County urban communities. Our example demonstrates the importance of youth voice and of responding to current community needs.

A number of key strategies can make this kind of partnership successful. Any youth development organization interested in working with a library partner would need to attend, as did Baltimore County 4-H, to assessment and planning, quality youth development training for facilitators, participant recruitment, quality programming delivery, the sustainability of the partnership, and evaluation (Fields, 2011). Additional recommendations for implementing 4 Youth, By Youth in a local library system are to:

- Reach out to the library's youth services department or its equivalent to identify common goals and mutually beneficial methods of reaching youth in the local library
- Identify multiple funding sources to support the program through the local management board, the state 4-H foundation, local businesses, or other grant opportunities
- Identify key players and volunteers in the library and community who can serve as advocates for the program and as links between 4-H and the library
- Market the youth program in the library, in the 4-H community, and in local neighborhoods
- Continue to assess and adapt the program to meet the changing needs of the youth and the community

Though quality afterschool programs vary in structure and content, the overall goal is the same: to provide safe environments where youth can engage in learning

and develop their life skills to become competent, caring, and contributing adults in their community. The 4 Youth, By Youth 4-H afterschool program provides that opportunity in the Baltimore County Public Library.

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