

**Planting Partnerships: Establishing a Community Collaboration between Warren County
Cooperative Extension and the Youngsville Public Library to Increase Agricultural
Literacy**

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Introduction

The need for partnerships in Extension education has increased over the past few decades because of budget decreases and staffing shortages (Lopez et al., 1999). However, Cooperative Extension and other organizations often offer similar educational programs to the same audiences without association or collaboration (Jones et al., 2020). Greater collaboration between Cooperative Extension and these other organizations could potentially help both partners increase programmatic impacts, decrease programmatic costs, and broaden their capacity to educate more people (Jones et al., 2020; Lopez et al., 1999). Thus, there has never been a better time than the present to encourage and forge stronger partnerships between libraries and Cooperative Extension, especially 4-H (Faiks, 2002). 4-H is the youth branch of Cooperative Extension that applies youth development research, through non-formal education, directly from land-grant universities to local youth, families, and communities (Fields & Rafferty, 2012). 4-H provides various research-based, learning opportunities in science, agricultural education, citizenship, and healthy-living (Fields & Rafferty, 2012). For years, public libraries have served people of all ages and backgrounds, provided free access to educational resources and materials, recognized the importance of science literacy, and created strong ties with other community-based organizations (Smith et al., 2012). Research indicates that public libraries have partnered and collaborated with community organizations to foster youth development (Fields & Rafferty, 2012). The parallel visions of public libraries and Cooperative Extension in providing lifelong learning experiences and communicating science to the public can illustrate how partnerships between organizations can enhance the vibrancy of education and opportunity (Peich & Fletcher, 2015).

How It Works

Warren County Cooperative Extension partnered with the Youngsville Public Library to develop a three-part summer program series. The summer program series was designed to introduce general scientific concepts and increase agricultural literacy among youth in the local community. Specifically, the summer series was titled “Plants & Pollinators,” and each program within the series aimed to help participants understand the links between plants, pollinators, and the foods we eat. The 4-H program assistant in Warren County and the director of the Youngsville Public Library worked in partnership to develop and facilitate three summer program sessions. Each session within the series was one hour long and included the following: 1) a team-building or physical activity, 2) a brief, interactive lesson derived from research-based curricula, 3) a craft aligned with the lesson, 4) a story aligned with the lesson, and 5) a small snack. The three-part summer program series focused on plant anatomy, seed structure, and pollinators, with hands on experiences throughout. All necessary materials and supplies were secured prior to the program and the cost of those materials was shared by both participating partners. Similarly, Warren County Cooperative Extension and the Youngsville Public Library shared the responsibilities of planning, preparing, designing, and delivering the three educational programs. The 4-H program assistant from the Warren County Extension Office was responsible

for designing and delivering each of the three interactive science lessons and crafts, and the director of the Youngsville Public Library was responsible for selecting an appropriate story to fit within each lesson and engaging participants in reading and literacy activities during each program. All other roles and responsibilities were shared in collaboration between partners.

Each session within the summer program series was held at a pavilion in a local park. This specific location is central to Warren County, is not tied to either program partner, and promotes outdoor exploration among youth. The target audience consisted of youth ages five through eighteen, but all children, youth, and their families were welcome to participate in the program. The program was free to all participants, and they were not required to register in advance for the program. The three-part summer program series was advertised on social media by both partners, and program flyers were posted at local businesses throughout the community to inform local citizens of the summer program. At the conclusion of each program, the partnership was promoted, and participating youth received further information about Warren County Cooperative Extension, Warren County 4-H, and the Youngsville Public Library to engage them in future events and activities.

Results to Date

The number of participants varied between four to fourteen when considering attendance at each of the three program sessions. The positive verbal feedback communicated by the majority of those youth participants indicated that the three-part summer program series was educational and enjoyable. Participants specifically enjoyed learning about plants and pollinators in an outdoor setting, rather than in a traditional classroom. Most of the youth participants, as well as their parents and guardians, who provided feedback stated that they would like the three-part summer program series to be offered again the next summer. Overall, the collaboration of Warren County Cooperative Extension and the Youngsville Public Library allowed program partners to involve a greater number of participants, decrease program costs, and employ the knowledge and experiences of both the 4-H program assistant and the library director.

Future Plans

The positive feedback and experiences of both the youth participants, their parents, and the program partners have led to the planning and preparation of a three-part summer program series for next summer. By continuing the collaboration between Warren County Cooperative Extension and the Youngsville Public Library, local youth will have the opportunity to participate in science and agriculturally-related educational activities that promote knowledge gain and improve literacy skills. Additionally, the continuation of this collaboration can help to promote the value of partnerships within the local community.

Costs/Resources Needed

The 4-H program assistant in Warren County and the director of the Youngsville Public Library invested a considerable amount of time and energy into the design and delivery of the three-part summer program series. However, all the lessons were derived and modified from the 4-H curriculum that is available for free with an online account. Expenses paid by Warren County Cooperative Extension and the Youngsville Public Library were the cost of the craft supplies and snacks, totaling approximately \$130.

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