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Exploring Youth Development Priorities and Staff Competencies Across Religious and Secular Camps

In the spring of 2007, American Camp Association® (ACA) religiously-affiliated (RA) (n=89) and secular camps (n=214) from across the country participated in a study entitled “Is There Common Ground?” conducted by ACA, the Search Institute www.search-institute.org, and the National Collaboration for Youth www.collab4youth.org/ncy/index.htm. The ACA focus in the project was to explore the core competencies of staff working in both types of camps as well as their interests in and concerns about working together. The camp sample included a diverse set of camps, representing resident camps (64%); day camps (16%); and both resident and day camps (19%). Christianity was the most common religious affiliation of RA camps. Secular camps tended to be “independent nonprofit camps” (39%); “agency camps” (33%); or “independent-for-profit camps” (22%).

Key Findings

- When asked to rank dimensions of child development (social, emotional, cognitive, physical, and spiritual) on a 5-point scale where 5=most emphasis, camp directors overall placed the highest emphasis on social development (4.31) and emotional development (3.90). Cognitive development (3.07) and spiritual development (3.14) were the lowest priority for the overall sample.
 - Respondents from secular camps selected social development (64%) and emotional development (35%) as their top priorities. However, respondents from RA camps selected spiritual development (78%) and social development (37%) as their top priorities.
- Respondents were asked to identify the essential competencies for camp staff.
 - The top five were: developing positive relationships and communicating with youth (86%); demonstrating the attributes and qualities of a positive role model (85%); identifying potential risk factors in the program environment and taking measures to reduce those risks (70%); enhancing youth’s moral and character development (66%); and working as part of a team and showing professionalism (63%).
 - The greatest differences between secular camps and RA camps in the essential competencies were in the areas of: helping youth to develop spiritually (85% for RA camps compared with 23% for secular camps); respecting and honoring cultural and human diversity (49% for RA camps compared with 64% for secular camps); and interacting with and relating to youth in ways that support asset building (41% for RA camps compared with 57% for secular camps).
- Respondents were asked to identify the competency areas for which they were most interested in receiving training.
 - The top five were: involving and empowering youth (69%); enhancing youth’s moral and character development (67%); developing positive friendships and communicating with youth (66%); providing youth with experiences that are novel, stimulating, and challenging (66%); and adapting, facilitating, and evaluating age-appropriate activities with and for the group (62%).
 - The greatest differences between secular camps and RA camps were in the areas of: involving and empowering youth (62% for RA camps compared with 72% for secular camps); helping youth to develop spiritually (66% for RA camps compared with 47% for secular camps), and respecting and honoring cultural and human diversity (38% for RA camps compared with 55% for secular camps).

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- By comparing priorities, interests, and current competencies, a measure of “felt need” (Roehlkepartain, Artman, Garza, Garst, & Bialeschki, 2007) was calculated. The top five areas of need for professional development for youth workers at camp (based upon “felt need” of the entire sample) were:
 - ❑ Developing positive relationships and communicating with youth (70%)
 - ❑ Demonstrating the attributes and qualities of a positive role model (58%)
 - ❑ Enhancing youth’s moral and character development (51%)
 - ❑ Involving and empowering youth (51%)
 - ❑ Identifying risk factors in the program environment and reducing those risks (43%)

Recommendations

The key findings from this survey, as well as from the larger Common Ground results, suggested the following opportunities to increase learning and collaboration across secular and religiously-affiliated camps:

- Build relationships, share knowledge, and communicate openly about their needs. Although their youth development goals may differ, they can work toward shared understanding and ends.
- Create a shared framework for moral and spiritual development and train staff to be better prepared to facilitate this type of growth in youth.
- Integrate the discussion about staff qualifications and preparation by creating a common language, clearly defining successful work with youth, and strengthening our understanding of staff core competencies and professional development.
- Develop practical tools to support training across religious and secular camps.
- Conduct additional research to learn more about youth workers professional development needs and to explore the relevance of contexts, particularly nature-based settings.

Garza, P., Artman, S., Roehlkepartain, E. Garst, B. & Bialeschki, D. (2007). *Is There Common Ground? An Exploratory Study of the Interests and Needs of Community-Based and Faith-Based Youth Workers*. National Collaboration for Youth and Search Institute.

The detailed report, *Is There Common Ground? An Exploratory Study of the Interests and Needs of Community-Based and Faith-Based Youth Workers*, is available from ACA’s Web page at www.ACAcamps.org/research/common_ground_study.php.