

FieldNotes

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Peer Educator Retention Strategies

Peer education is a proven, effective method for affecting behavior change by moving individuals from basic awareness to discussing their beliefs and values, especially through participatory activities. However, most peer education programs use volunteers, who are quick to start up activities but also quick to drop out. Finding ways to motivate and retain peer educators is a challenge shared by peer education programs everywhere. This *FieldNotes* highlights some of the innovative ways that the International Youth Foundation and its partner organizations around the world are using to not only recruit peer educators but also to keep them actively committed to their important work.

These key strategies include: 1) *Emphasizing close supervision*. Approaches such as predetermined schedules of staff visits and clusters of peer educators for support can help ensure quality,

technical competence, and investment by youth.

2) *Harmonizing personal and organizational values and beliefs*. Including time in training sessions for youth to clarify their personal values on sensitive issues can help them to be better prepared for the challenges ahead.

3) *Developing creative compensation approaches*. Most experts view some type of incentive as helping with retention, especially allowances to cover basic expenditures in the field.

4) *Promoting full participation of peer educators in program implementation*. Feeling connected to the program by having substantive responsibilities can help youth want to stay; partnerships with youth also promote feelings of investment.

5) *Fostering career development opportunities*. Training, program implementation, and assignments can help youth better explore career options and next steps.

“ When young people are left out of the program design process, they will never feel they own the program. ”

—Dorothy Atieno, African Youth Trust, Kenya

LESSONS FROM THE IYF COMMUNITY

Stella Amojong, Executive Director of the Girls Empowerment Initiative (GEMINI), works with peer educators in Kenya to empower high-risk youth with life skills education and information on sexuality and HIV/AIDS. She says that to motivate peer educators, GEMINI recommends the following:

- **Participation in project design, management and evaluation.** This gives peer educators a sense of belonging and being part of the solution, enabling them to gain a firm grasp of the issues that are impacting their communities.
- **Transportation and financial support.** Direct or financial support for transportation or food expenses enables peer educators to attend activities more regularly and helps reduce financial barriers to their ongoing participation.
- **Tokens of appreciation.** In order to facilitate easy communication and demonstrate that they are key members of our organization, we offer participants promotional items such as caps and t-shirts as well as mobile phone airtime.
- **Training.** To ensure peer educators are adequately empowered, GEMINI holds regular training sessions, workshops and seminars to impart fresh knowledge, reinforce key messages and strengthen their capacity as effective information providers.
- **Public recognition.** To increase their self-confidence and motivation, we publicly acknowledge our peer educators during community mobilization activities and public meetings through certificates, public tribute, and other forms of appreciation from GEMINI's top officials and community leaders. This recognition has greatly helped to increase their participation in our programs.

Dorothy Atieno, Reproductive Health Specialist at the African Youth Trust in Kenya, contributes the following recommendations

to help motivate and sustain peer educators in their programs:

- **Peer Mentorship.** This involves peer educators (ages 18 to 24) visiting schools and starting peer mentorship programs, an approach that nurtures leadership skills among youth within a more informal setting. Another strategy is to identify older people in the community who can mentor peer leaders so that they gain more skills. Keep in mind the importance of monitoring the effectiveness of peer mentorship programs. Such monitoring can be done through inter-school competitions or through competitions between peer educators themselves.
- **Creativity.** To motivate peer educators, challenge and encourage them to use their own creativity and explore a hidden talent, whether it be singing, poetry, storytelling, or designing. Dorothy suggests that programs should “Empower them to use their talents to make the peer education program sustainable.”
- **Leadership.** Says Dorothy: “Every program designed for young people should be led by them.” Peer educators should elect their own leadership and help establish their own rules. Adults' roles should be to guide rather than direct.
- **Decision Making.** Youth should be engaged at all levels of decision making and program design. “When they are left out of the program design process,” Dorothy warns, “they will never feel they own the program — even when money is given as an incentive.” To ensure youth participation, establish advisory committees that include young leaders who were or are still active in their youth groups.
- **Passion.** Before any funding is given to support youth programs, always challenge young people to find solutions that don't need financial support. Says Dorothy: “We need to encourage passion-driven programs rather than funding-driven ones.”

Additional Resources

UNFPA Peer Education toolkit:
www.unfpa.org/publications

FHI Formative Research on Youth Peer Education Program Productivity and Sustainability:
www.fhi.org/en/Youth/YouthNet/Publications

UNAIDS Peer Education and HIV/AIDS: Concepts, Uses and Challenges:
www.harare.unesco.org/hiv aids/db.asp

UNICEF Life Skills: Peer Education:
www.unicef.org/lifeskills/index_12078.html



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