



Promoting Sustained Engagement in a Community Ecological Literacy Program

Mike Harris BEETS Program



Introduction

The Band of Environmentally-Educated and Employable Teens (BEETS) Program is a component of Community Grows, a community based organization based in the Western Addition district of San Francisco. BEETS is a paid internship for 15 – 19 year-old youth who meet for approximately 100 hours over three months, learning the theory of garden and farming practice and then applying it at community gardens in the Western Addition but also at gardens spread throughout the city. The participants work together to build, tend, and harvest gardens. Program elements also include job training, career development, site visits, and field trips. Each program session focuses on a different theme related to the environment and the curriculum includes BEETS participants going into their communities to

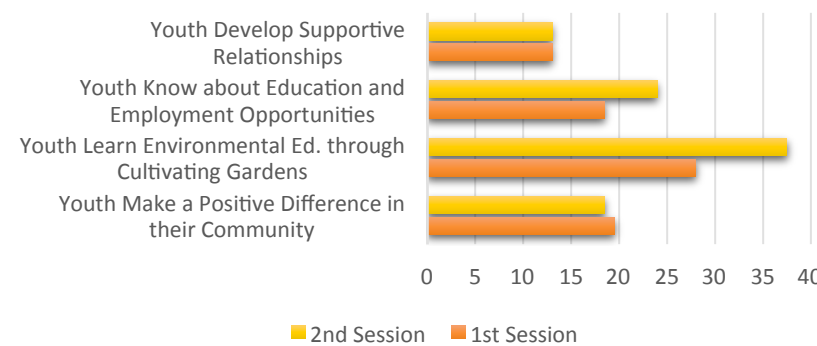
teach younger children about the content they are learning. The BEETS program offers transferable skill building and a small salary. The remuneration serves as an attraction when recruiting and admitting participants and also simulates the model of getting paid for work. Participants report a significant increase in communication, problem solving, leadership, and teamwork skills after each session



The Challenge

Participants are encouraged to reapply for subsequent sessions after they graduate. The limit is three sessions, as long as the participant falls in the 15 – 19 age range.

Reported Program Benefits



The benefits for youth who reapply include skill development and entrenchment, relationship building, as well as a higher awareness of education and employment opportunities. Less time spent on recruitment means BEETS' small staff can focus on program development, strategy, and alumni engagement and not spend time with outreach.

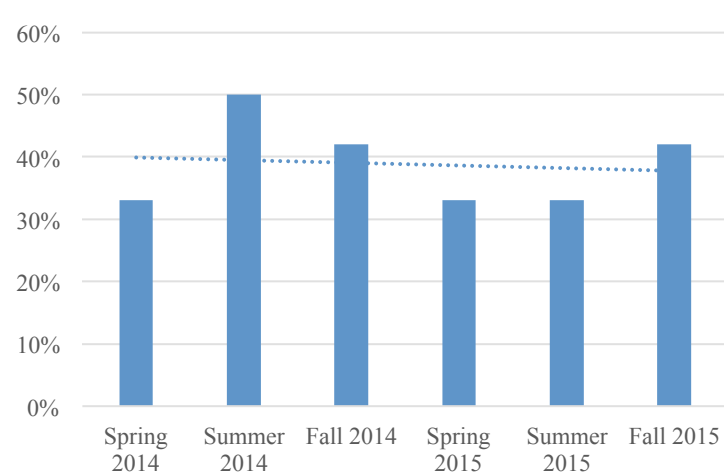
BEETS pays participants who reapply a higher stipend when they return and are given more responsibilities during program sessions, including representation on the Advisory Council.

Barriers to Reapplication

Despite the benefits of reapplying, rates of participants reengaging for a subsequent session have been on the decline. My research revealed that there are several reason why participants might not want to sign up for a subsequent session:

- Finding a job to earn minimum wage pay which is higher than the stipend
- Preference to focus on high school and college classes
- Participants are unaware of the benefits of reapplying (other than more money)
- Significant travel time to and from sessions
- Perception that it is good for one session but not another

Reapplication Rates

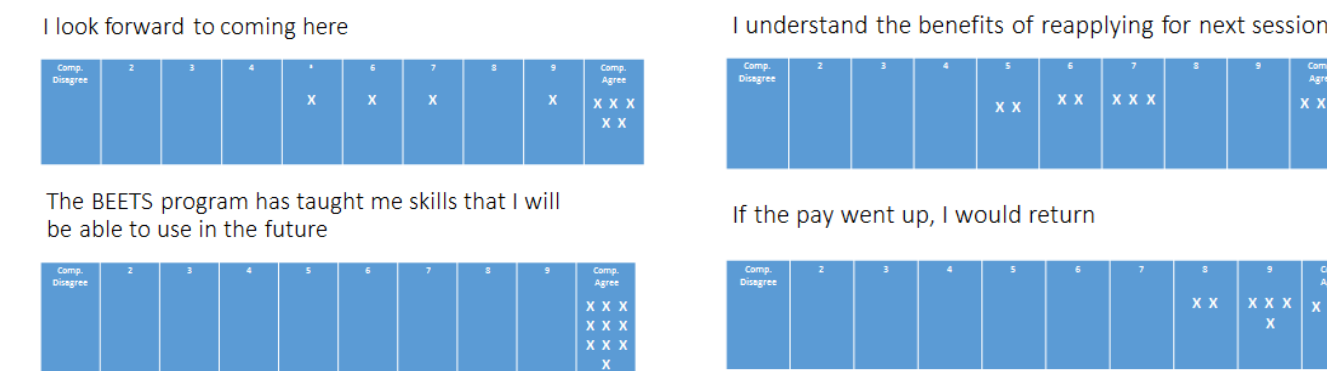


Research Methods

The core of the research consisted of :

- 1) In-person and email communication with Melissa Tang, BEETS' Program Manager.
- 2) Individual interviews with current participants who reapplied and alums that did not
- 3) Focus group conducted in one session with the current Fall 2015 cohort. *See Below Selected Focus Group Results.*

Participants were asked to position themselves along a continuum according to their agreement with certain statements. Some Examples:



Recommendations

More Pay	Participants agreed that the key motivator for reapplying was the pay. While the pay rate just recently increased and is unlikely to go up any time soon, it's important to recognize the impact this can have on re-engagement motivation
Increased Influence	The program places more responsibilities on participants when they reapply, but these have little deep impact on the program. Research shows that the opportunity to have a legitimate impact on program content and process stimulates youth engagement and leads to more meaningful results for themselves and the communities they serve
Adjusted Times	An adjusted time 4:00 pm - 6:00 pm could potentially encourage better attendance at weekly sessions and remove the commute rush as a reapplication deterrence.
Longitudinal Curriculum	An option would be to adjust the BEETS curriculum so that it builds on the work of each session. Participants are encouraged to reapply to continue their learning and leverage their desire for a sense of accomplishment.

REAPPLY! Beets

More MONEY!
2nd Session = \$1124!
3rd Session = \$1174!

More FUN!
Next session, we'll do some fun things. For example, trips to (example1), (example2), and (example3)
Our theme for next session is (theme) and we'll learn more about issues like (1), (2), and (3)

CONTACT: MELISSA TANG
BEETS Program Manager
CommunityGrows
John Muir Elementary
School Office
380 Webster St., Room 408
San Francisco, CA 94117
cell: 415.298.7055
melissa@communitygrows.org

In the last session, you learned about (X), (Y), AND (Z). In the next session, we'll continue this theme AND start a new one - (theme!). We'll focus on (X) AND (Y) and learn about the impact this has on you and your community.

JOB TITLES

- COMMUNICATIONS
- OPERATIONS
- ADVISORY COUNCIL
- GARDEN LEAD
- OUTREACH
- ADMISSIONS

JOB SKILLS

- LEADERSHIP
- TEAMWORK
- COMMUNICATION
- CRITICAL THINKING

don't delay!

"In any investment, you expect to have fun and make money"
—Michael Jordan

Stated Benefits

When asked to share what some the benefits of reapplying are, focus group and interview participants referenced more money and more responsibilities but not the deeper level benefits of community building, and skill entrenchment and diversification. This flyer is a suggested method of engaging participants to reapply to program. It shares the benefits of doing another session, including the pay and the skills. It also includes images of current students to encourage them to reapply and gain more experiences and memories.



The BEETS program offers valuable skills for youth in a community that has historically struggled to incubate this development in the past. The program's model is structured around developing gardening skills and learning about food-related topics such as sustainable agriculture, drought management, and food justice. It also fosters transferable skills like leadership, collaboration, communication, and critical thinking. Research shows that programs such as this include benefits such as empowering youth, increasing self-efficacy, and enhancing self-awareness and social achievement, improving mental health and academic performance, reducing rates of delinquency, substance abuse, and school dropout, reducing health disparities, and reducing violence. Particularly, programs that encourage long term engagement are more likely to succeed.

BEETS participants who apply for multiple sessions experience benefits for themselves but the program itself also benefits. Despite this, reapplication numbers are erratic and trending down. Returning participants are encouraged to reapply with more pay and responsibilities, but the pay is still below minimum wage and the extra responsibilities are not touted as incentives for reapplying. Personal interview research reveals that timing, pay, and content are all reasons that applicants might not reapply.

Suggestions for increasing the rate of reapplication include adjusting the time of the program so that participants can manage the commute better, adjusting the curriculum so that it spreads across sessions to entrench skills development, communicating the benefits of reapplying using a flyer that more overtly states the tangible and non-tangible benefits, and increasing the responsibilities that participants adopt in subsequent sessions. This last is perhaps the most important as it reflect the research. This research indicates that when youth are given an opportunity to work collaboratively with adult in program development, they more acutely experience the benefits of the program and transfer this back to the communities they serve. Communities like the Western Addition grow stronger when programs encourage *sustained* participation. BEETS sees experiences benefit for itself and its participants.



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