Community Technology Review
Winter 2004-2005

Sustainability: ScienceQuest in Columbia, SC

by Kate Snow

Keeping a good program going takes more than money. This article explores the techniques one community technology center, Fast Forward CTC in Columbia, South Carolina, has employed to ensure the longevity of one after-school program, ScienceQuest.

Background: ScienceQuest at Fast Forward

Kelsey, Oliver, Nita and Josh making an engine at Fast Forward.

Too often we are led to believe that sustainability of programs is solely a function of finances. Yet even a well-funded youth program won't produce results if young people don't want to participate and adults in the larger community don't care about its success. At Fast Forward CTC in Columbia, South Carolina, one after-school program, ScienceQuest, has caught on in such a way with both youth and adults that the director, Dee Albritton, was recently prompted to explain, "In our case, sustainability isn't about funding, it's about interest."

Fast Forward CTC launched ScienceQuest, a curriculum for teaching hands-on, investigative science to middle schoolers in after-school settings, two summers ago. They started with nine students and four adult coaches who met once a week from September to June. Using a tool called the I-search, they formulated questions, conducted experiments and published their activities on a website.

The first year was a stunning success. The kids were so enthusiastic about the program that Dee immediately shortened the program to one semester so more youth could participate. The next year 37 kids worked on ten different teams over two semesters with 24 adult coaches. The 2004-2005 sessions promise similar numbers. There is a waiting list to participate. Former participants want to attend again, siblings and classmates want to sign up, and higher income parents are asking if they can pay for their children to attend (youth are chosen based on their need for the program either academically or socially, and on recommendations by teachers).

Factors Contributing to Success

An after-school program must be grounded in the desire to make a difference in the lives of young people. Yet many after-school programs care passionately about young people and still fail. Fast Forward is an example of a successful program due to three interdependent factors: a solid organizational foundation, enthusiastic participants, and invested external stakeholders. A successful program must rest on a healthy foundation—good leadership, quality curriculum, stable location, and funding. Yet to be *sustainable*, it needs more. In this case, ScienceQuest draws on two other sources of support: participant enthusiasm and the investment of external stakeholders. Like pipelines of raw fuel, student and community interest provide the energy to propel this program forward. These sources flow when tapped by an able leader with publicity, participation, and interaction.

There's No Escaping the Need for a Healthy Foundation

There's no question that Fast Forward is a healthy CTC with a dynamic director—Dee Albritton received the Toni Stone Innovative Initiative Award from CTCNet and was a winner of the second CTCNet Success Story contest. Fast Forward is several years old and operates in two sites, including the local middle school, which provides space and Internet access in-kind. Its base funding comes from several sources, including the City of Columbia. ScienceQuest is a tested, engaging curriculum. Dee estimates it costs about $15,000 to implement, for program management, a part-time guidance counselor, supplies, t-shirts, snacks and field trips. [ed. note: *The ComTechReview* has covered both ScienceQuest and the Fast Forward CTC summer camp previously.]

While Fast Forward is a stable organization, it is not without the challenges of many CTCs. Staff is constantly developing new funding streams, have recently cut programs, and spend much energy maintaining key support relationships. As with any CTC, participant needs often outstrip the time and energy of staff. And there is always uncertainty about where the next funding will come from.

Excited Young People

You can build it, but they may not necessarily come. While ScienceQuest was only launched after the Youth Advisory Board approved it, this was no guarantee other students would want to try it out or stick with it over time. After-school programs increasingly face the dilemma of marketing academic enrichment programs to young people who are deservedly hoping for relief from the structure and pressure of the school day – this at a time when funders are pushing for just these kinds of programs.

The first challenge was hooking that first batch of students. Fortunately, ScienceQuest is an engaging program driven by student interests. The first teams measured water salinity, played with waves, used a weather station, and created a solar system. They did mock weather reports at the actual WSIS television station in front of the blue screen and saw themselves on the TV monitors. The reputation of ScienceQuest as a fun learning experience was set. And everybody in the Fast Forward world and the Hand Middle School knew it.

Fast Forward's participants are eager spokespeople for the program. Throughout the year, their activities were made public. Kids hanging around after school could watch the experiments happening on the picnic tables outside. Teams were also encouraged to invite other teams over to watch whenever they had something exciting to demonstrate. Dee was encouraging the students to share their natural enthusiasm both within the program and outside of it, such as at the snack time before each meeting. Links were made to the rest of the school as well. Students were invited to demonstrate their experiments for the school's own television show, the Principal's Corner. A policy was instituted where teams could have enough materials to run their experiments an extra time for their science classes. Not least among the strategies, participants were given ScienceQuest t-shirts and were encouraged from the beginning to wear them on ScienceQuest days. As a student at the Hand Middle School, you practically can't *not* know about ScienceQuest.

Community Support is Key

One nonprofit professional has said, for nonprofits "your entire existence depends on the community. If you don't keep your organization vital, a living, breathing organization in the community, it is going to die. You need to get oxygen from the community." Yet very often after-school programs work in isolation from everyone except their participants. When they do interact with the larger community, it's a visit to a museum or public site. In Fast Forward's case, however, the outside world is invited in.

To start with, ScienceQuest *requires* outside participation in the form of volunteer coaches. This requirement has led to one of the strongest resources for the program. One of the first coaches was Claudia Benitez-Nelson, a professor in marine science at the University of South Carolina. Based on Claudia's positive experience, she recruited graduate students to be coaches and established a way for them to earn credit for volunteering to coach, ensuring a steady supply. Organizing college credit for volunteering was no small feat, but Claudia felt so strongly about the program given her personal experience, she was eager for it to succeed. As many program directors know, having an institutional supply of qualified volunteers is vital; lack of staffing—even volunteers—has closed many a good program. It also ensures that even if the program director were to step out of the picture, ScienceQuest would have a much better chance of surviving.

Teachers and parents also provide vital support for the program. These two groups of stakeholders reinforce youth participation and learning. Teachers are asked for recommendations of youth to participate. Kids are encouraged to invite teachers to see their ScienceQuest experiments and to attend celebrations. Dee promotes them wearing their ScienceQuest t-shirts in school, where teachers are sure to see them and ask questions.

Parents, too, are invited to watch experiments and activities, especially as they arrive to pick kids up at the end of the day, since most activities are done out of doors on picnic tables near the place where parents drive up. Parents get the Fast Forward newsletter and are also exposed to the ScienceQuest t-shirts. The buzz from the day's activities spills over to the evening conversations at home.

Finally, Dee takes deliberate steps to involve and inform the larger community. In addition to getting coverage in the local print and TV news, she presents the activities of ScienceQuest quarterly at the City Council and regularly to the school board. She invites other after school programs to visit Fast Forward. While none of these activities provide concrete funding in the moment, each helps establish a stronger presence for the program in the mind of the community. When it does come time to ask for financial support, she can be sure people and organizations are aware of ScienceQuest and its positive effects on young people.

Conclusion

While nothing is certain in the nonprofit or after-school field, Dee Albritton has optimized the potential future of one program, ScienceQuest, at the Fast Forward CTC by setting up and encouraging mechanisms that promote the program's success. At the heart of all this work is passion for improving the lives and prospects of a very particular set of young people. If Dee and her staff, or Dr. Benitez-Nelson and the graduate students didn't care deeply about making a difference for these sixth graders, none of the techniques would matter. But given their care and drive, several factors make it more likely that their efforts will be effective. They start with a healthy foundation: a stable physical location, base funding, a quality program like ScienceQuest and an able leader. Then given initial excitement and enthusiasm, they use every opportunity available to share the excitement of the program with both potential participants and external stakeholders. The result is a program that stands a good chance of existing long enough to provide many dozens of low-income, at-risk youth with exhilarating experiences of science and valuable interactions with caring adults.

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