The Impact of Peer Networking On Out-of-School Time Staff

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Abstract

Professional development is important for out-of-school time, a diverse field with a workforce that has a variety of educational experiences, professional backgrounds, and skills. Principles of adult learning illustrate the unique needs of adult learners (e.g., autonomous and self-directed), which can be effectively integrated into professional development experiences through peer-oriented learning opportunities. The Out-of-School Time Resource Center (OSTRC) has been providing peer-oriented learning experiences for the greater Philadelphia area through monthly Peer Networking Meetings. This study focused on researching the effectiveness, and most effective elements, of these Peer Networking Meetings. Through monthly post-meeting surveys, a focus group, and interviews with panelists, the OSTRC conducted extensive research on the outcomes of the Peer Networking Meetings. The research considered the format of the meetings, the benefits to attendees, the promotion of professional identity within the out-of-school time field, and integration of meeting content and acquired knowledge into the workplace. Study findings are generally positive and provide implications for future Peer Networking Meetings and other professional development for out-of-school time professionals.

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Executive Summary

Professional development is important for out-of-school time, a diverse field with a workforce that has a variety of educational experiences, professional backgrounds, and skills. The Out-of-School Time Resource Center (OSTRC) has been providing peer-oriented learning experiences for the greater Philadelphia area through monthly Peer Networking Meetings (PNMs) for five years. The PNMs are monthly opportunities for networking, panel presentations, and discussion among peers in the out-of-school time field. This study focused on ascertaining the degree to which the primary PNM goals were met:

1. Participants will acquire new knowledge/skills
2. Participants will report a positive change in attitude about their perceived professional identity.
3. Participants will apply information from the PNMs in their own youth programs.
4. Participants will share resources.
5. Participants will establish new professional relationships with other individuals and or organizations.

Additionally, this study sought to identify the meetings and meeting factors that contributed to successfully achieving those goals. The OSTRC identified the following tangible and variable meeting factors:

1. Amount of participant interaction and networking;
2. Relevance of the content; and
3. Quality of the panelists.

Our analysis revealed that the PNMs were positive experiences for the respondents. They gained knowledge and skills and reported increases in their belief in the importance of the topics as well as their professional identity. While the participants were generally quite satisfied with their experiences at the PNMs, they did indicate lower scores when asked about their interaction with other participants. The respondents also reported that their organizations would support them in their application of the meeting information, but that they would not be expected to apply information from the meetings. Despite the lack of the organizational expectation to apply information, the respondents stated they planned to share the meeting information with colleagues.

The OSTRC identified two significant trends that were consistent throughout the meetings. One was that panelist preparedness was directly related to overall satisfaction as well as to high rates of achievement relative to each of the PNM goals. As a result of this finding, the OSTRC is confident that panelist quality is a significant factor impacting both the satisfaction with and impact of PNMs.

The second notable trend was that, with the exception of two meetings, "participant interaction" was consistently rated lower than all of the other factors, yet did not seem to impact any of the PNM goals. This finding was surprising, since the interviews and focus groups – as well as the research that originally generated the PNMs – indicated that networking with peers is the primary reason for attending the PNMs. Additional research should be conducted to further explore this trend.

Overall, the data show that PNMs are a successful, peer-oriented professional development opportunity for OST staff. Attendance increased 49% from FY08 to FY09 which means that more OST

staff are attending the meetings and participating in peer-oriented learning and establishing professional relationships. While the data from this study are promising, future meetings can improve by integrating strategic opportunities for meeting participants to network and plan for future collaboration in such activities as small group discussions and speed networking. By integrating such steps into the meetings, it is likely that participants will further increase their knowledge, skill, and belief as well as develop sustainable partnerships. Additionally, OST organizations should pursue systems of accountability in order to ensure that meeting content is not lost. By increasing opportunities for collaboration, it is likely that more participants will use, reinforce, and share their knowledge learned from the meetings.

Based on this study, the OSTRC recommends the following for implementing and enhancing peer networking meetings for OST professionals:

Panelist Recommendations

1. Recruit dynamic, inspiring panelists.
2. Prepare the panelists through in-person or conference call meetings.
3. Encourage panelists to provide tangible tips rather than "showcase' their individual programs.
4. Give panelists specific directions and prompts, and repeatedly emphasize that they adhere to these directives.
5. Actively manage the panel discussion, making sure that panelists do not go over their time allotment or stray too far from the topic.

Networking Recommendations

6. Experiment with initial ice-breakers and other networking strategies.
7. Implement small break-out sessions led by the panelists and moderators.
8. Decrease the networking time in the beginning of the meeting, and inset a networking "break" into the middle of the event.
9. Give the audience a chance to answer a participant question before directing it to the panelists.

Additional Recommendations

10. Expand recruitment strategies to continue to increase attendance at the PNMs. Establish an attendance goal for FY2010 to monitor performance.
11. Create mechanisms to encourage and influence attendees' likelihood of engaging in post-meeting activities (e.g., attend an event that was announced at a meeting).
12. Facilitate post-meeting contact between attendees to encourage collaboration between OST programs.
13. Encourage OST organizations to implement mechanisms of accountability to implement information learned at the PNMs and to encourage collaborations and partnerships between the organizations.

Introduction

Professional development is important for out-of-school time, a diverse field with a workforce that has a variety of educational experiences, professional backgrounds, and skills. The field of out-of-school time presents many opportunities for innovative professional development experiences. Principles of adult learning illustrate the unique needs of adult learners, which can be effectively integrated into professional development experiences through peer-oriented learning opportunities. The Out-of-School Time Resource Center (OSTRC) has been providing peer-oriented learning experiences for the greater Philadelphia area through monthly Peer Networking Meetings (PNMs). The PNMs are monthly opportunities for networking, panel presentations, and discussion among peers in the out-of-school time field. This study focused on researching the effectiveness of the PNMs, examining the format, the benefits to attendees, the promotion of professional identity within the out-of-school time field, and integration of meeting material and knowledge into the workplace. Study findings have implications for future PNMs as well as professional development for the out-of-school time field.

Literature Review

Out-of-school time (OST) is a growing field that presents many opportunities to develop and implement quality professional development. Peter (2009) defines professional development (PD) as a spectrum of activities, resources, and supports that help practitioners work more effectively with or on behalf of children and youth. Research demonstrates that professional development for the OST workforce improves program quality (Bowie & Bronte-Tinkew, 2006; Rhode Island Kids Count, 2003). Additionally Weiss (2005/2006), asserts that staff quality is associated with positive outcomes for children and youth.

Professional development in the OST field typically consists of workshops, trainings, conferences, and other opportunities focused on improving the skills of staff who work with children and youth (Bowie & Bronte-Tinkew, 2006). These trainings and workshops cover a variety of topics such as youth development issues, curriculum and program planning, human resources administration, and more.

The variety in professional development topics mirrors the diversity in the OST field, as programs have different foci that may require specialized professional development (e.g., sports, academic enrichment). There are currently no uniform standards or guidelines for OST professional development, and postsecondary learning opportunities are scarce (Huebner, Walker, & McFarland, 2003). The wide range of formats, topics, and required skill levels in OST professional development therefore creates a field of practitioners with a range of knowledge and aptitudes. With no standardized educational foundation, the OST field lacks a workforce that is uniformly grounded in research, theory, and best practices (Huebner, Walker, & McFarland, 2003).

Principles of Adult Learning

The OST workforce represents a diverse set of adults with varying backgrounds, competencies, educations, interests, and skills (Bowie & Bronte-Tinkew, 2006; Huebner, Walker, & McFarland, 2003). Given this variance, and the lack of a unified set of educational prerequisites or standardized pre-service

training, ongoing professional development opportunities are vital to workers' success and sustained involvement in the field (Huebner, Walker, & McFarland, 2003; Bowie & Bronte-Tinkew, 2006). Because professional development is critical to the OST field, it is essential that adult learning principles be incorporated into the design and implementation of professional development opportunities. Including adult learning principles in OST professional development will contribute to participants successfully understanding, retaining and implementing knowledge and skills in their work with youth.

The most effective trainings and workshops accommodate the unique needs and requirements of adult learners. Adults' life experiences and prior knowledge should be valued throughout the learning process, and new information should be connected to these experiences whenever possible.

Adult learners are autonomous and self-directed and they learn better when they are guided to their own knowledge, as opposed to being supplied with information (Lieb, 1991). Because adults are goal-oriented, professional development opportunities must be relevant to their work and help them attain their desired goals (Lieb, 1991). Adults may not be interested in learning for its own sake; rather, they are interested in what the knowledge can do for them in their work and personal lives (Thoms, 2001). Above all, adult learners must feel respected, and should be treated as equals with important experiences and knowledge (Lieb, 1991). One method to accomplish the integration of adult learning principles into professional development is through peer-oriented learning opportunities.

Peer-Oriented Professional Development

Peer-oriented learning is an effective approach to adult education and professional development because it addresses several adult learning principles. Peer-oriented learning refers to any type of learning process in which knowledge and skill are gained through active help and support by status equals in similar positions being actively engaged. (Topping, 2005). For example, peer-oriented learning allows adults to maintain their autonomy and to control the direction of their own learning processes (Topping, 2005). In addition, peer-oriented learning has been used effectively in the education and social work fields through team teaching, collaborative partnering, and communities of practice (Topping, 2005; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008; Moore, 2008).

Peer-oriented learning has long been accepted as a beneficial tool in many academic and education circles, and has been used extensively in classrooms from the elementary level through the collegiate and graduate level (Topping, 2005). In peer-oriented learning relationships, learners are matched in knowledge and skill levels, thus both are able to find challenge and benefit in their sharing and learning experiences (Topping, 2005). They are able to learn from the knowledge, skills, and real world experiences of others. In addition to gains in topical knowledge and skills, Topping (2005) found that peer-oriented learning increases social and communication skills.

In recent years, the OST field has begun to utilize these concepts in its professional development practices. Evidence suggests that peer-oriented learning opportunities will help to improve and standardize the knowledge and skill levels and best practices within the OST field (The Partnership for After School Education, n.d.). Because professional development opportunities for the OST field vary,

peer-oriented opportunities help to bridge divides and facilitate the sharing of information within the field. Including peer-oriented learning experiences within OST professional development will help the field to grow and develop, becoming more unified and recognizable as a force for positive youth development.

Evolution of the Philadelphia Peer Networking Meetings

The research discussed above suggests that peer-oriented learning can positively impact educators' knowledge and skills. Given the literature, it is useful to further explore the impact of peer-oriented learning for OST staff. The Out-of-School Time Resource Center (OSTRC) first recognized a need for alternative professional development venues in December 2004 and January 2005, based on information collected from a series of focus groups conducted with Philadelphia Area OST staff. The focus groups revealed that staff desired alternative venues for networking and professional development. To address this need, the OSTRC organized and began hosting monthly PNMs, a form of peer-oriented learning.

Description of the Philadelphia Peer Networking Meetings

The PNMs occur at a central location accessible via public transportation each month. The OSTRC schedules the meeting dates in advance and coordinates the dates with the local school district's schedule to ensure there are no conflicts with school holidays. The monthly meeting times alternate between morning, afternoon and evening so that staff with a variety of schedules may attend.

The PNMs include informal networking, panel discussion led by peers, and open dialogue among peers working in OST. The meetings allow frontline and administrative staff to share resources, address challenges, and present accomplishments; attendance also counts toward formal training credit hours. Our previous research confirms that a mixture of OST professionals attends the meetings including upper-level management, mid-level management, direct service staff, and capacity builders.

The OSTRC surveys PNMs participants yearly to obtain their feedback on the topics for the panel presentations. Previous topics included: Effective *Advertising and Program Outreach*, *Addressing Summer Learning Loss*, *Male Roles in OST*, *Teaching Tolerance and Effective Behavior Management*. Each meeting follows a set agenda that includes registration and informal networking followed by participant introductions and announcements, a panel presentation by three panelists (ten minutes for each), and a group discussion (See Appendix A for a sample agenda). The meeting concludes with an additional thirty minutes of networking.

From January 2006 to June 2009, the OSTRC hosted 36 PNMs that were attended by 575 different individuals representing 237 organizations in the Greater Philadelphia Area. The number of attendees at the meetings varied from 15 to 65. From FY08 to FY09, the number of unique (i.e., different) participants at the PNMs increased by 49%.

Past Research

The OSTRC uses a research-based survey to evaluate each meeting. This survey helps to inform and improve the monthly meetings. For example, past research from the meetings showed that participants' acquisition of knowledge and skills was positively correlated to the perceived preparedness of the panelists. As a result, the OSTRC took measures to more carefully select the panelists and formally prepare them by providing a structure that included specific questions to integrate into their presentation.

Through the generosity of the Robert Bowne Foundation, the OSTRC expanded its research methodology to further research the impact of the PNMs on participants and programs. The grant allowed the OSTRC to conduct a follow-up survey and a focus group with participants to identify those meetings and meeting elements that are most closely linked to achieving the PNMs program and participant goals.

Current Research Methodology

This paper presents the results of a ten month study on the PNMs using a mixed methodology. The study sought to answer the following research questions:

As a result of attending PNMs do participants……………………..

1a. Acquire new knowledge/skills?
1b. What participant and meeting factors[1] are associated with the greatest gains?

2a. Report a positive change in attitude about their perceived professional identity?
2b. What participant and meeting factors are associated with the greatest gains?

3a. Apply information from the meetings in their own programs?
3b. How do participants apply information from the meetings in their own programs?
3c. What participant and meeting factors are associated with the greatest gains?

4a. Share resources?
4b. What types of resources and how did participants share the resources?

5a. Establish new professional relationships with other individuals and/or agencies?
5b. What types of relationships are established and how are they maintained?

The quantitative component of the study used the OSTRC's paper PNM Surveys to assess satisfaction, acquisition of new knowledge and skills, participant interaction, panel preparedness, institutional support and integration, belief in the importance of the topic, perception of professional identity, and extension. A five-point Likert scale was used to capture the participants' level of agreement (5 = strongly agree and 1=strongly disagree). In addition, the OSTRC emailed an online follow-up survey to all PNM participants, assessing these measures of impact as well as application. Both surveys also

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[1] Participant factors may include demographics (e.g., education, job responsibilities) and meeting factors may include panel effectiveness as measured by the post-meeting surveys and/or focus groups.

captured extensive demographic information to assess how specific meetings and topics impact particular populations of participants.

The qualitative component included a focus group with PNMs participants, who attended two or more meetings, to determine the extent of meeting satisfaction, knowledge/skill acquisition, institutional support and integration, application, and extension. The OSTRC also conducted key informant interviews with meeting panelists to learn what influences them to attend the PNMs, suggestions for recruiting panelists, and the impact of the PNMs on their professional identity. Lastly, OSTRC staff used a structured observation tool to identify the participants' level of engagement and the extent of their networking.

Quantitative Results: Post-Meeting Surveys

The OSTRC distributed surveys to the participants at the conclusion of each meeting. From January 2009 to October 2009, 299 people attended the monthly meeting and 214 people submitted completed surveys (72% completion rate). The attendance at each meeting ranged from 14 to 65. Table 1 details the attendance and number of completed surveys for each PNM. The data in the following sections are reported in the aggregate form and missing data are excluded from the analysis.

Table 1: Summary of PNM Attendance and Completed Surveys

PNM	People in Attendance	Completed Surveys	Response Rate
January 15: Improving Communication between Adults and Youth	32	28	88%
February 17: Sports as Positive Youth Development	38	29	76%
March 19: Arts in OST Programs	14	11	79%
April 28: Strengthening Your Program's Budget	34	24	71%
May 20: Youth Competition	19	12	63%
June 18: Summer Learning Loss	56	40	71%
September 23: Effective Advertising and Program Outreach	65	41	63%
October 22: Serving Students with Special Needs	41	29	71%
Total	**299**	**214**	**71%**

Overall Findings

The data show that the respondents were quite satisfied with the PNMs. The line graph (Figure 1) illustrates the mean scores for the following indicators by month: Overall Satisfaction, Participant Interaction, Panelist Prepared and Relevant Content.

Figure 1: Overview of Participants' Satisfaction by Indicator and Meeting
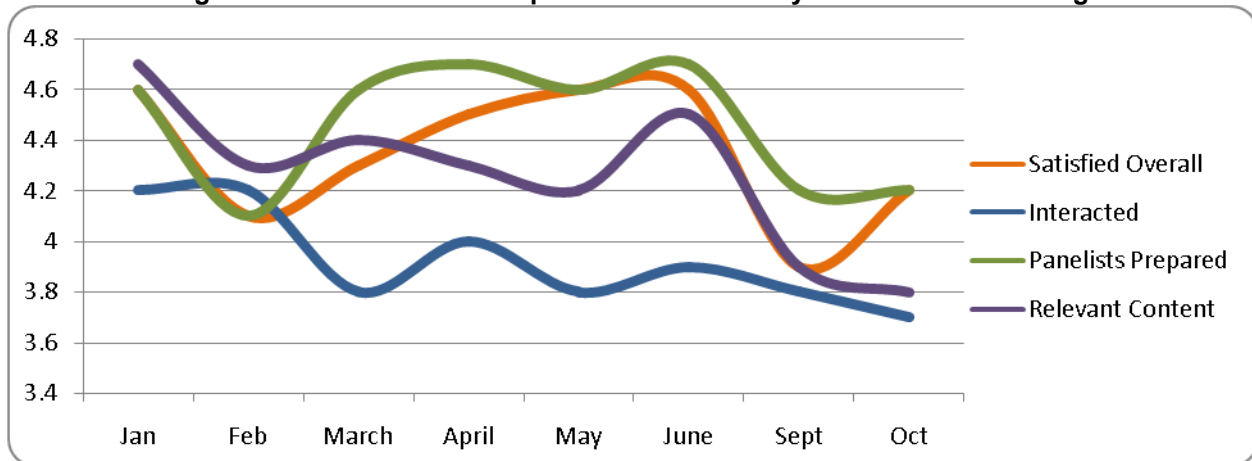
The data show that respondents reported the highest level of overall meeting satisfaction (**orange line**) for the January, April, May and June PNMs (4.6 for all). The participants were less satisfied at the March (4.3), October (4.2), February (4.1) and September (3.9) meetings.

The respondents also provided high marks for the organization and preparedness of the panelists (**green line**) at the June (4.7), April (4.7), May (4.6), March (4.6) and January (4.6) meetings. They found the panelists less prepared at the October (4.2), September (4.2), and February (4.1) meetings.

The respondents also provided high marks for the relevancy of the PNMs content (**purple line**). The January PNM received the highest satisfaction on this indicator (4.7) followed by the June (4.5), March (4.4), April (4.3), February (4.3) and May (4.2) meetings. September (3.9) and October (3.8) received the lowest satisfaction scores.

The respondents reported lower levels of satisfaction with the interaction at the PNMs compared to the other variables (**blue line**). Despite the lower satisfaction scores, 73% of the participants reported that they exchanged contact information with one or more people at the meeting and 87% planned to contact people they met at the PNMs.

Institutional Support, Integration and Extension

Overall, the respondents reported that their organizations will support them in using the information from the meetings in their work with youth (Figure 2, **blue line**). Interestingly, they were less likely to agree that their organizations will expect them to use the information from the PNMs in their work with youth (**red line**). This was most often evident at the March (3.6), May (3.7) and September (3.7) meetings. Although the respondents perceive that their organizations do not expect them to use information from the meetings; the data show that they intend to share information from the meetings with colleagues (**green line**).

Figure 2: Overview of Institutional Support, Integration and Extension by Month and Mean
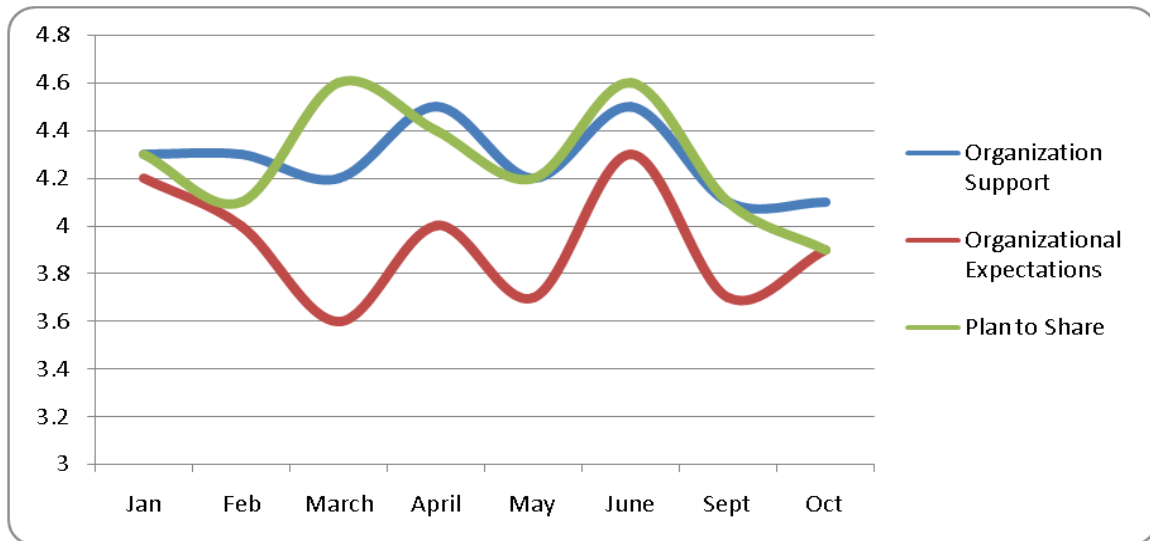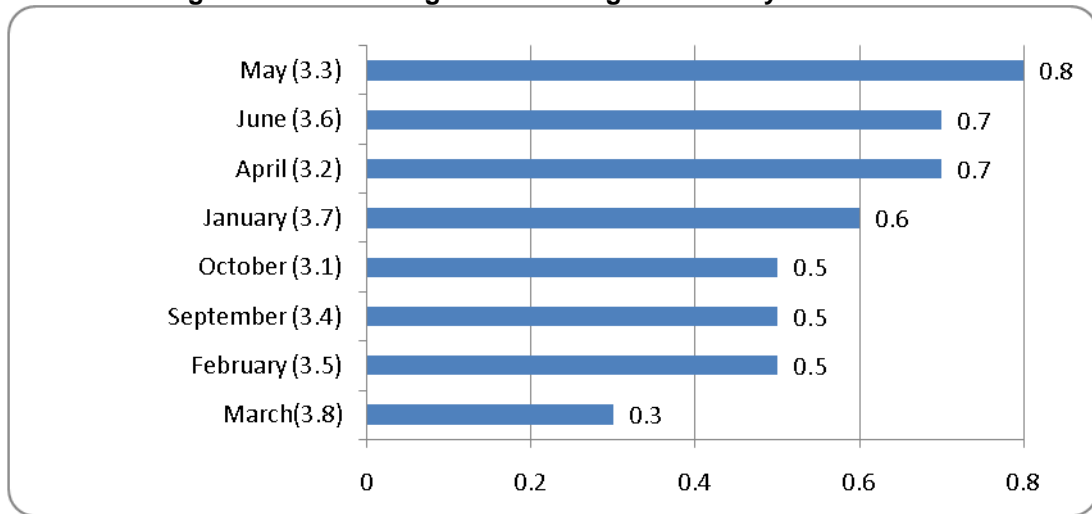

Changes in Knowledge, Belief and Professional Identity

The survey asked respondents to assess their knowledge of the meeting topic, belief in the importance of the topic and professional identity using a five-point Likert scale (5=high and 1=low) before and after attending the meeting. It is important to note that the change in knowledge (and belief, and professional identity) is presented in absolute point change, *not relative (percent).* Using an absolute point change is more accurate because a Likert scale does not have a universally defined zero, nor are the distances between the intervals universally defined. The way the choices are coded—ascending (i.e., 1, 2, 3, 4, 5) versus descending (i.e., 5, 4, 3, 2, 1)—greatly impacts the relative (percent) values; whereas, if we use absolute point change the differences will be the same. For example, a change from 1 to 2 is the same as 4 to 5—an increase in one point—whether the variable is coded in ascending or descending values. Presenting the results in terms of point change, focusing on the degree of change, is a more statistically sound method of analysis in this case.

Acquisition of New Knowledge and Skills

The data show that the respondents acquired new knowledge and skills at all of the PNMs. The participants reported the highest gain in knowledge and skills at the May (.8), June (.7), April (.7), and January (.6) meetings. The lowest knowledge and skills gains were reported at the March (.3), February (.5), September (.5) and October (.5) meetings. Figure 3 details the point change in knowledge/skills. The starting mean is in parenthesis.

Figure 3: Point Change in Knowledge & Skills by PNM

Month (mean)	Point Change
May (3.3)	0.8
June (3.6)	0.7
April (3.2)	0.7
January (3.7)	0.6
October (3.1)	0.5
September (3.4)	0.5
February (3.5)	0.5
March (3.8)	0.3

Belief in the Importance of the Topic

The data show that the respondents' belief in the importance of the topic increased in all but one meeting. They reported the highest gain in belief at the May (.6) and June (.5). Figure 4 details the point change in belief in the importance of the topic. The starting mean is in parenthesis. It is important to note that the respondents generally entered the meetings strongly believing in the importance of the topics and their impact for youth.

Figure 4: Point Change in Belief of Topic Importance by PNM

Month (mean)	Point Change
May (3.8)	0.6
June (4.1)	0.5
April (4.1)	0.3
February (4.1)	0.3
October (4.2)	0.2
September (4.1)	0.2
January (4.3)	0.1
March (4.5)	0
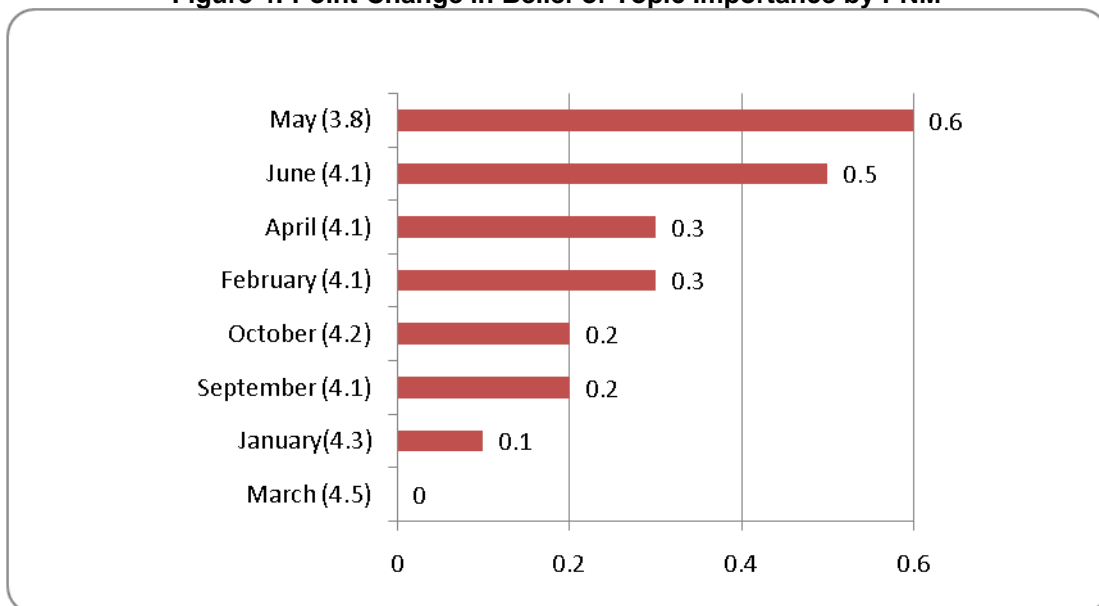
Perception of Professional Identity

The data show that the respondents' perceived professional identity increased in all but one meeting. They reported the highest gain in professional identity at the June (.4) and April (.4) meetings. Figure 5 details the point change in belief in the importance of the topic. The starting mean is in parenthesis.

Figure 5: Point Change in Perceived Professional Identity by PNM

PNM	Point Change
June (4.0)	0.4
April (3.8)	0.4
October (3.6)	0.3
September (3.8)	0.3
January (4.0)	0.3
May (4.2)	0.2
February (3.9)	0.2
March (4.3)	0
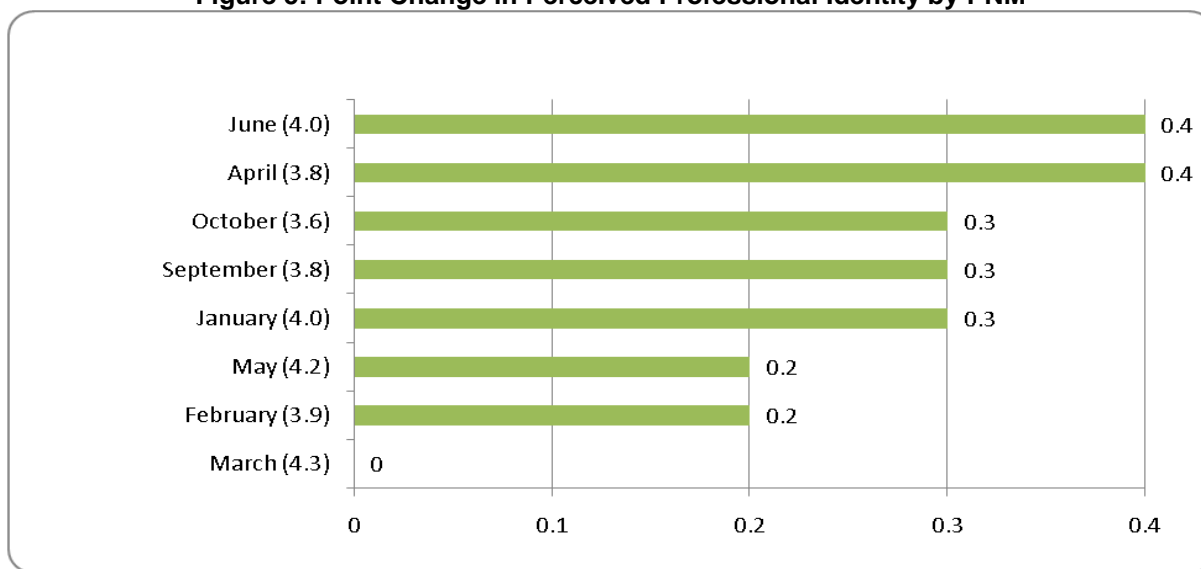
Demographics

The demographics at the monthly PNMs were similar each month. Most respondents were female and had either a Bachelor's or Master's degree. The respondents' most often identified their race as African American or Caucasian. Most respondents identified their age category as 21 – 29. Respondents most frequently identified themselves as "mid-level administrators." The respondents' years of experience working with youth spanned multiple categories: approximately one-third of the respondents reported having 2 – 5, 6 – 10, or 11 – 20 years experience. Table 2 details the respondents' demographic characteristics.

Table 2: Overall Demographic Characteristics of PNM Participants (N = 214)

Gender	Percent		Race	Percent		Education	Percent
Female	80%		Black/African American	43%		HS Diploma/GED	3%
Male	20%		White or Caucasian	35%		Some College	12%
			Asian	3%		Associates Degree	5%
			Hispanic or Latino	10%		Bachelor's Degree	48%
			Multiracial	9%		Master's Degree	31%

Age Category	Percent		Job Responsibility	Percent		Years Experience	Percent
21 – 29	44%		Upper-Level	6%		One year or less	8%
30 – 39	24%		Mid-Level	48%		2 – 5	29%
40 – 49	19%		Direct Service	35%		6 – 10	29%
50 – 59	10%		Capacity Building	11%		11 – 20	25%
60 or older	3%					21 or more	9%

Summary

The data indicate that the PNMs were positive experiences for respondents. They gained knowledge and skills and reported increases in their belief in the importance of the topics as well as increases in their professional identity. While the participants were generally quite satisfied with their experiences at the PNMs, they did indicate lower scores when asked about their interaction with other participants.

The respondents also reported that their organizations would support them in their application of the meeting information, but that they would not be expected to apply information from the meetings. Despite the lack of the organizational expectation to apply information, the respondents stated they planned to share the meeting information with colleagues.

Additionally, review of this data revealed two significant trends that were consistent throughout all of the meetings. One was that panelist preparedness was directly related to overall satisfaction as well as to high rates of achievement relative to each of the PNM goals. As a result of this finding, the OSTRC is confident that panelist quality is a significant factor impacting both the satisfaction with and impact of PNMs. The second notable trend was that, with the exception of the January and February meetings, "participant interaction" was consistently rated lower than all of the other factors, yet did not seem to impact any of the four PNM goals. Ultimately, the findings show that the meetings provided positive peer-oriented learning opportunities for the respondents.

Quantitative Results: Follow-Up Survey

The OSTRC conducted a follow up survey with 139 out-of-school professionals who attended a Peer Network Meeting (PNM) from January to June 2009. The follow up survey sought participant feedback on the design and structure of the PNM, how the participants' organization supports them in applying information from the PNM and how participants applied and shared the PNM information in their work. Thirty-six people responded to the survey resulting in a 26% response rate. Most of the respondents attended one PNM (see Table 3).

Table 3: Overview of PNM Attendance by Number of Respondents

Number of Meetings Attended	Number of Respondents Attending Meeting
1	14
2	10
3	7
4	3
5	2
6	0

Satisfaction

The respondents were generally quite satisfied with all elements of the PNM (Figure 6). Although the mean scores are quite high, the level of satisfaction with "networking time" fell lower on the scale compared to the other questions and the respondents provided lower scores when asked if there is sufficient time for networking.

Figure 6: Satisfaction with PNM Elements
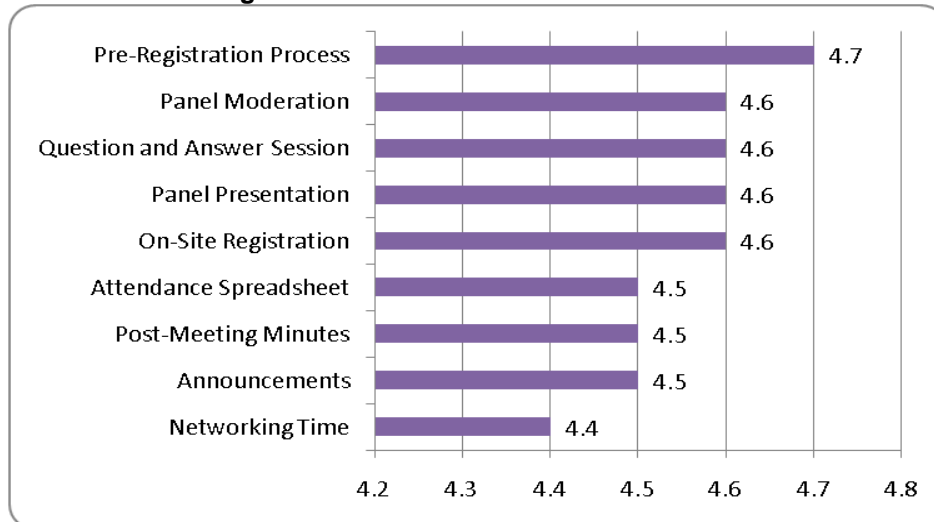
In addition, while the respondents reported being satisfied with the "panel presentation and "question and answer session," they were less satisfied with the amount of time for each of these elements (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Satisfaction with Allotted Time
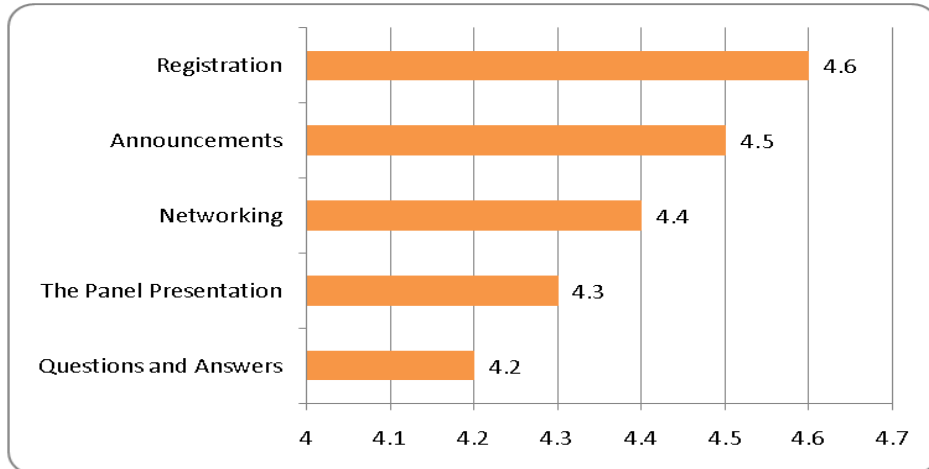
Post-Meeting Activities

The respondents typically do not attend an event announced at the PNM, send announcements for the OSTRC newsletter, visit the PNM blog or use the attendance spreadsheet to contact someone. The respondents often review the post-meeting minutes and share them with colleagues or peers.

Figure 8: Overview of Respondents' Engagement in Post-Meeting Activities
(N= 33 and 5 = Almost Always & 1=Never)
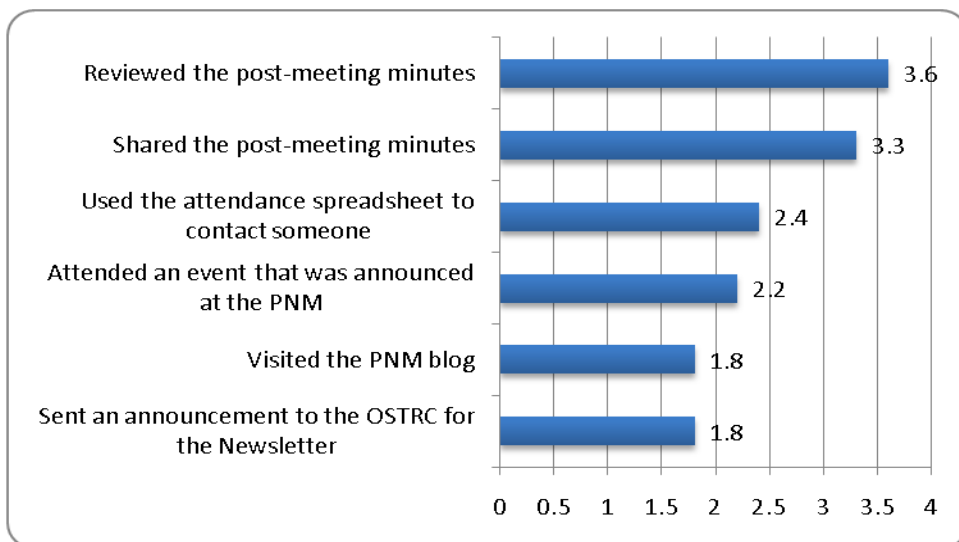
Importance of Panel Presenter Attributes

The survey asked respondents to rank the importance of the following presenter attributes: prepared, knowledgeable, represent diverse programs, provide resources, stay on topic and are talented speakers. The data show that all of the panel presenter attributes are "very important" or "quite important" to the respondents. The respondents prefer panelists who are prepared, knowledgeable, provide resources, and stay on topic. A few respondents stated that it is 'fairly important' for the panelists to represent diverse programs and be talented speakers.

Organizational Support

Twenty-one people (50%) responded when asked to describe how their organization supports them in applying the knowledge or skill learned at the PNMs. Most often, respondents stated their organizations encourage the following:

Sharing of information: Many noted that their organizations encourage them to share information from the PNM at staff meetings. One individual stated, "I am asked to speak at our staff meetings about the topics, especially if there is something we are being challenged with at the time. I print out and share the minutes from the meetings with staff."

Create events, workshops or programs: A few people stated that the administration encourages them to create a workshop to share knowledge and skills with the frontline workers. Another stated that, "we use the information to create events for our kids and/or implement programmatic changes."

One respondent stated the organization does not provide active support noting that, "We are not presently enabled to act on any new information---we've been limited in many instances to simply repeat programs and processes verbatim due to limited staffing and resources."

Application

The respondents most often share an event announcement with colleagues or use a new activity in their programs. Only two people have not had time to apply information and one person "did not learn any new knowledge or skill" at the PNMs. The three people who chose "other" provided the following explanations:

- "I had an event with someone that I met at a meeting.
- "Staying abreast of the field."
- "Hearing the experiences and struggles of other programs helps me deal with the stress of being the administrator."

Figure 9: How Respondents Applied Knowledge or Skills Learned at the PNMs
(N=33 and Multiple Responses Allowed)
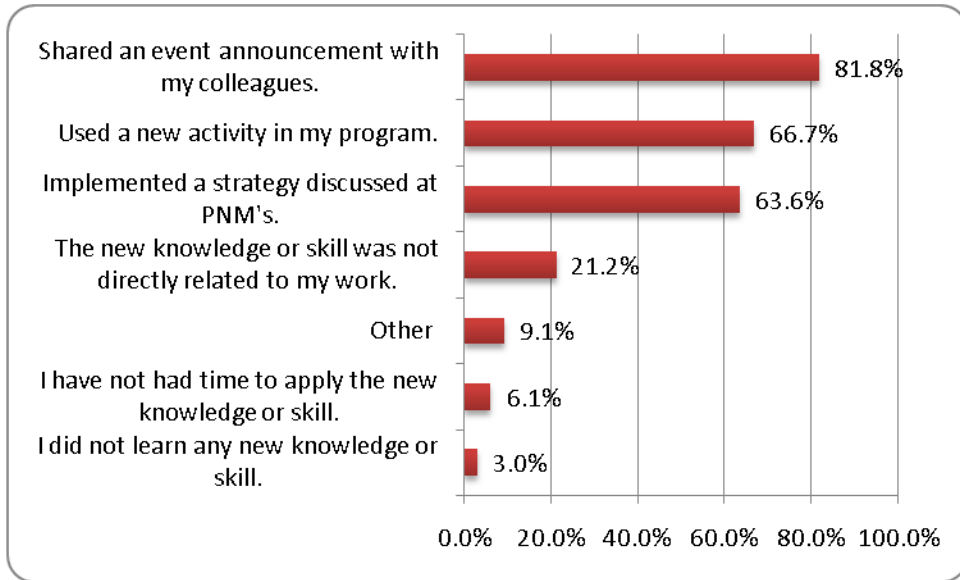
Extension

The respondents most often informally discussed the PNMs with colleagues. About half of the respondents copied resources or handouts for their colleagues or presented information at a staff meeting. Only one person did not share any knowledge or skills with colleagues.

Figure 10: How Respondents Shared Knowledge or Skills with Colleagues
(N=33 and Multiple responses allowed)
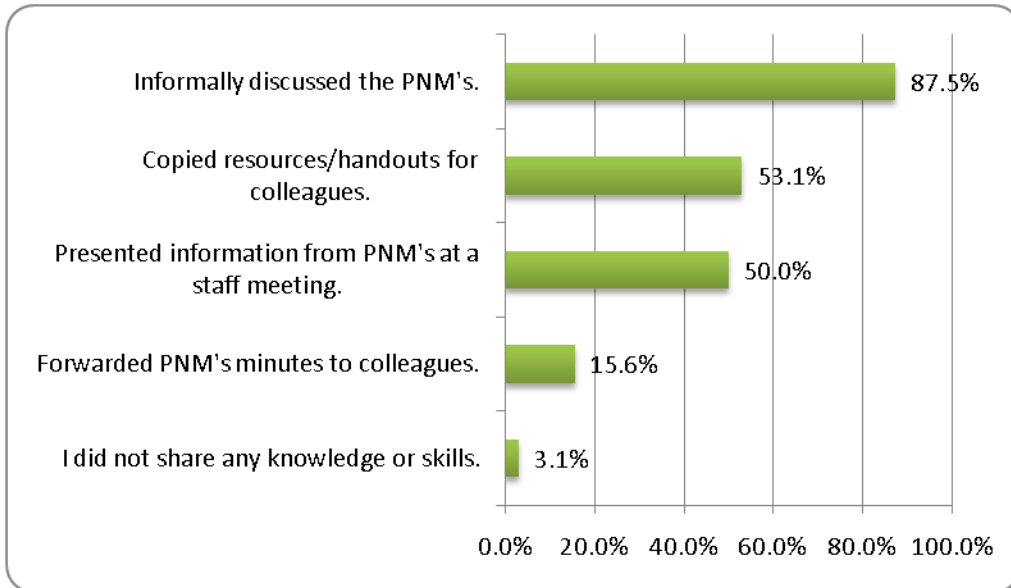
Follow-Up

The respondents "rarely" (36%) or "sometimes" (36%) follow up with someone they meet at the PNMs. A few respondents "frequently" (9%) and "always" (9%) follow up with someone they meet at the meetings.

Likes and Dislikes

The respondents most often cited their PNMs "likes" as the opportunity to meet new people, network, and brainstorm with like-minded individuals. In addition, several commented that they liked the "easy, relaxed location" and the food provided.

The respondents provided contradictory views on the networking time before the panel presentation: some like it and want more of it, while others dislike it and prefer that the meeting begin with the panel presentation. Several respondents dislike the evening PNMs. Many also would like more time for questions for the panelists. And another suggested including small group activity or exercise chaired by panelists and moderators for role play to clarify and demonstrate information and how to apply topic in a program.

While most like the location of the PNM, one person stated it is difficult to convince other staff to come downtown for the meeting and suggested holding the PNM at various locations or agencies throughout the city. One person commented that occasionally there are poor speakers.

Demographics

Similar to the post-meeting survey demographics, most respondents were female (84%) and had either a Bachelor's (45%) or Master's degree (45%). The respondents' most often identified their race as African American (39%) or Caucasian (39%). The age categories of the respondents spanned multiple categories. Respondents most frequently identified themselves as "mid-level administrators" (52%). Nearly half of the respondents have six to ten years of experience working with or on behalf of youth. Most respondents indicated that they work with 6th – 8th graders (65%), 9th – 12th graders (59%), and K – 5th graders (53%).

Summary

Overall, the follow-up data show that the respondents are generally quite satisfied with the PNMs. They provided high marks for the most of the elements and structure of the PNMs. The respondents typically share information from the meetings with colleagues, but do not follow up with peers after attending a meeting. While the data are positive, it is important to note their imitations. First, the low response rate—26%—limits the generalization of these findings to the larger PNM community. Second, 38% of the respondents based their feedback on attending one PNM. Because the general tone and topic of each meeting varies, participants who attended more than one meeting may have a stronger concept of the typical PNM. Ultimately, the findings show that the respondents value the monthly PNMs

and appreciate the OSTRC's effort to coordinate and host the meetings. Overall, no alarming negative data were present, but some of the satisfaction scores fell lower, despite still being high.

Qualitative Results

Focus Group Procedure and Purpose

OSTRC staff conducted a two-hour focus group with nine randomly selected out-of-school time professionals who attended two or more PNMs from January to June 2009. The OSTRC provided breakfast and a book to the participants as an incentive for participating in the group. Two OSTRC staff co-facilitated the group while a third OSTRC staff person transcribed the responses. The purpose of the focus group was to learn more about the participants' understanding, expectations, likes and dislikes of the PNMs with the intent to improve and enhance future meetings.

Participants

Nine OST staff—six females and three males—participated in the two-hour focus group. The participants represented various positions (i.e., direct service, middle management and upper management) in OST programs from South Jersey and the Greater Philadelphia area. All of the participants were actively engaged in the focus group and responded to questions when prompted.

Understanding of Networking Meeting & Reasons for Attending

The facilitator asked the group what comes to mind when they hear the term networking meeting. The responses were similar and included the following:

- opportunity to socialize,
- share information,
- make connections, and
- build relationships.

Most of the group first learned about the PNMs through a colleague. One individual learned about the PNMs through a Google search. The group attended the PNMs for a variety of reasons, but all of the participants stated that the topic or the presenters influence their attendance. Further, most agreed that they attended the PNMs to establish collaborations and collect information. One noted the following:

> *Every time I go to a meeting, I learn about another organization or program that I did not know about, learn about new resources and models of business. Another said, "I like listening, thinking something through, and finding missing pieces to an idea or program.*

Additional reasons cited by the group included staying connected to others in the field and getting out of the office. The group generally did not communicate to other colleagues their intention to attend a meeting. Most of the group stated they do not expect or want to see the same people at every meeting. Yet, a few added that sometimes it is nice to see the same people because it is reminder to follow up, but

generally, they know they can see the people at other places. One person added that, "Tips and tools drive people to attend the meetings. They are looking for one thing that they can take back to their programs and apply right away, or soon."

PNMs: Likes and Dislikes

The group prefers morning meetings because it does not break up the day and they believe that it is easier for other staff to attend when it is first thing in the morning. One person stated that the evening meetings, "….are only good to bring a board member or volunteer who cannot attend during the day."

The group provided mixed feedback on the location—several prefer the consistent location of the meetings, but did offer that if advance notice is provided an alternative location works, too. One individual stated that the United Way location is difficult to access via public transportation from her office. Several also noted that the United Way's address is confusing (seven Benjamin Franklin Parkway) and parking is expensive.

The group said that the panel sometimes feels rushed and that there is not enough time for questions/answers. They suggested that the moderators pre-screen the announcements and closely monitor the time for this portion of the meeting. Additionally, several people find the pre-networking ineffective. The participants offered a resounding 'no' to implementing a scavenger hunt and icebreaker questions. Instead, the participants suggested that the meetings include thematic tables grouped by type of organization and institute a form of speed networking to get people talking.

The entire group said that using "experts" as panelists would change the dynamic of the meetings. One said, "It is good to have peers, but sometimes these peers speak to the group as if they are experts. Sometimes they preach instead of presenting what works for them." Another added, "Sometimes at meetings there are people in the room that are more qualified to talk about a topic at a PNM than the presenters---the moderators should find ways to engage these people more."

The group recommended that the OST community provide quarterly suggestions for PNM topics. The entire group stated that they like the colorful flyers, meeting agendas, research highlights, and the meeting minutes. They also enjoy the monthly newsletter, although no one has sent an item for inclusion in the newsletter (yet many commented their intention).

The group provided mixed feedback on the post-meeting evaluation. Several stated that it is too long. One person stated, "I don't really put much thought into evaluation past the first few questions. Too, much, too many of the same questions. Although some meetings I do put more effort into the evaluation than others." However, another person stated, "I don't think it's too long, I like it handed out at the beginning, I can fill out parts of it during the meeting. I've seen much longer surveys."

Utilization of Information

The group utilized information from the PNMs the following ways:
- – Created a report summarizing the meeting and distribute to staff

- Disseminated information at in-house trainings
- Followed up with people met at meetings—contacted an organization to do activity

Most of the group reads the meeting minutes, but not the blog. The group agreed that for the blog to be successful, a tutorial about blogging, and its value, is necessary.

Suggestions for Increasing Attendance & Final Comments

The group brainstormed methods to increase attendance at the PNMs. One person stated that not everyone has flexible hours, so this could preclude attendance. Another suggested that the OSTRC recruit "new faces" as panelists. Several people agreed that the flyers should include the value of the meeting: resource sharing and free food. A few participants offered the following final thoughts about the PNMs:

- "Even though there were complaints about the setting, it is nice for us to come down, see a new environment, meet new people."
- "Include more of the conversation piece in a small-group setting. Smaller group discussions would be a really good peer experience."

Panelists Key Informant Interviews

Three OSTRC staff conducted four structured individual interviews with OST professionals who served as panelists at a PNM to learn what influenced them to attend the PNMs, suggestions for recruiting panelists, and the impact of the PNMs on their professional identity. All four of the panelists first learned about the PNMs from a colleague and have attended multiple PNMs over the years. All of the panelists accepted the speaking invitation because they each wanted to share their experiences [about the specific topic]. In addition, one panelist, "wanted to get the message out about the summer program" and another "wanted to do my part to give back."

Each panelist praised the PNMs and finds them to be a good opportunity for OST staff to share ideas and resources. Each enjoys the opportunity to meet new people. One panelist provided the following details:

> *I like the networking opportunities and the opportunity to share information, challenges, and resources. I have used resources and made successful contacts with people I have met at the meetings this year. I do not like the structure of the networking portions of the meetings. I often do not know who I want to talk to until everyone goes around and introduces themselves at the start of the meeting. Then, in the networking time after the panelists, everyone leaves quickly. I prefer more structure to the end networking time.*

In addition, one panelist offered the following feedback about the PNMs:

> *I like that the meetings bring a variety of people together who have different roles in OST – directors, administrators, direct service leaders. I think this variety brings diverse perspectives to the meetings. But I am disappointed in the growth of the PNMs. I would have expected that the meetings attract 200 OST staff by this time.*

The panelists acknowledged that the PNMs are somewhat different than other professional development opportunities in which they have presented. For example, the time is shorter (10 minutes per panelist) and is based on broad concepts. In addition, one panelist noted that the PNMs do not have a hierarchy and that they are more about sharing information among peers.

Each panelist found the OSTRC's preparation for being a panelist "excellent." One further commented, "They provided guidelines that helped me prepare my presentation." Another panelist said:

> *I only wanted to know my time limit. The guidelines were not important to me because I was presenting material that I was familiar with. I did not need to plan what I was going to say because this is stuff I know – I didn't need to think of what to say.*

All of the panelists said they would serve as a panelist at a future meeting. They offered the following suggestions for recruiting panelists:

- Emphasize the value-added as a panelist. As a panelist, you help people to learn about new resources.
- Provide more notice and preparation time before the meeting.
- Inform each panelist what the other panelist will present and discuss.
- Encourage OST staff to nominate themselves for topics they know they are good at and would like to speak about.
- Create a stronger and wider marketing campaign to increase attendance.

Session Observations

Two OSTRC staff used a structured observation tool to gather supplemental data on the panel presentation and the participants' engagement and interaction during the April and May PNMs. At both meetings, the observers found that the panelists were prepared, stayed on topic and exhibited knowledge in the topic. In addition, the panelists were engaging and retained the participants' interest throughout the presentation—as evidenced by the limited side conversations among the participants and the extensive question and answer sessions. At both meetings, the observers noted that the networking and participant interaction decreased after the panel presentation. Many participants left the meetings before its scheduled end time.

Limitations of Research

As in any study, this is not without its limitations. First, the OSTRC organizes and evaluates the monthly PNMs. Because we evaluate our own meetings, some responses may be more favorable due to the respondents' desire to appear agreeable. Second, the respondents who completed the follow-up online survey and participated in the focus group were limited to those that had access to or were comfortable with computers. Therefore, some Peer Networking constituents may have been excluded. A third limitation is that much of the data were collected at a single point in time, toward the end of the PNM season. Staff perceptions and activities may change significantly at different points in the year. Lastly, the study findings based on this small sample recruited from one series of PNMs is specific to the Philadelphia area and many not be applicable to other locations.

Most of these limitations could be mitigated by additional studies, to add further depth and breadth to the data. For example, a study conducted over a several year period could reflect multiple points in time and gather information about several experiences at PNMs. Simultaneous studies conducted on PNMs in different geographical areas could gather promising practices from multiple sources and suggest conclusions applicable to a greater number of networks, cities, and states. A longer, more in-depth study could poll attendees over the phone as well as through online communication, thereby increasing the number and diversity of responses. Lastly, outside evaluators could review and confirm the OSTRC's data and analysis.

Discussion

This study allowed the OSTRC to take its research further to determine what meeting factors are associated with and contribute to the greatest gains in knowledge/skills, professional identity, application, sharing resources, and establishing new professional relationships. Based on the quantitative data collected from the post-meeting surveys and follow-up survey combined with the qualitative focus group, individual interviews and session observations, we present evidence that peer networking meetings are a successful, peer-oriented professional development opportunity for OST staff.

Did participants acquire new knowledge/skills?

Our post-meeting surveys showed that participants acquire new knowledge and skills as a result of attending PNMs. In fact, at the meetings in which participants gained the most knowledge and skills (January, April, May and June), the participants provided the highest marks for the organization and preparedness of the peer panel. Somewhat surprising is that the participants provided high marks for the peer panel in March (4.6), but reported the least change in knowledge (.3 points). In addition, we found that overall meeting satisfaction is closely correlated with the organization and preparedness of the panel.

Did participants report a positive change in attitude about their perceived professional identity?

The data show that the participants' perceived professional identity increased in all but one meeting. The participants reported the highest gain in professional identity at the June (.4) and April (.4) meetings, which are the same meetings in which participants provided the highest marks for the peer panels. Further the focus group and panelists praised the PNMs stating that they are good opportunities for OST staff to share ideas and resources.

Did participants apply information from the meetings in their own programs?

The follow-up survey revealed that respondents most often share an event announcement with colleagues or use a new activity in their programs. A few people in the focus group also stated that they implemented an activity learned from the meetings in their youth programs.

Did participants share resources?

The respondents most often informally discussed and shared information from the meetings with colleagues. Many provided copies of resources or handouts for their colleagues or presented information at a staff meeting. Some created a report summarizing the meeting and distribute it to their colleagues.

Did participants establish new professional relationships with other individuals and/or agencies?

The focus group and panelists stated that as a result of attending the PNMs they have established new professional relationships with other individuals or agencies. Further, one panelist created two new collaborations with OST agencies that "significantly changed the agency's s scope and direction."   Lastly, a few people in the focus group retained the services of peers to provide training to their organizations' staff.

What participant factors resulted in the greatest gains in knowledge, belief and professional identity?

The demographics of the participants remained stable at each meeting. The data showed no differences in participants' acquisition of new knowledge skills, changes in professional identity, application of information, sharing of resources or establishment of new professional relationships based on education or job function.

What meeting factors contributed to the greatest gains in achieving the participant and meeting goals?

In addition to ascertaining the degree to which the primary PNM goals were met, this study sought to identify the meetings and meeting factors that contributed to successfully achieving those goals. The first step was to identify the key factors that both characterize and vary between the PNMs – those elements that represent a substantial piece of the meetings and can change significantly from meeting to meeting. Through a careful analysis of the surveys, focus group, and interviews, the OSTRC selected three primary meeting factors: **1) the amount of staff interaction and networking**; **2) the relevance of the content**; and **3) the quality of the panelists**. The second step was to determine if attaining the PNM goals (i.e., acquisition of new knowledge and skills, change in attitude, integration of information, resource sharing, and new professional relationships) corresponded with the prevalence of these factors in specific meetings.

This was not an easy task. One challenge was that some meeting factors are also goals, making a clear analysis difficult. "Networking," for example, is a PNM strategy as well as a participant goal. A second impediment was that few meetings consistently showed a correlation between specific factors and specific goals. For instance, the May meeting *("Youth Competition")* scored high in overall satisfaction, panelist preparation, and relevant content (key factors) and in each of the four PNM goals. In contrast, the January meeting *("Improving Communication between Adults and Youth")* ranked equally high in each

of the three factors, yet scored significantly lower in all of the PNM goals. It may be that different topics or audiences require different strategies and/or result in different types of goal achievement. Additional research and analysis would be needed to fully understand what works for whom, when, and toward what end.

However, the OSTRC was able to identify two significant trends that were consistent throughout the meetings. One was that panelist preparedness was directly related to overall satisfaction as well as to high rates of achievement relative to each of the PNM goals. As a result of this finding, the OSTRC is confident that panelist quality is a significant factor impacting both the satisfaction with and impact of PNMs. Thus, the section on "Recommendations" will focus extensively on strategies for selecting, training, and managing panelists.

The second notable trend was that, with the exception of the January and February meetings, "participant interaction" was consistently rated lower than all of the other factors, yet did not seem to impact any of the four PNM goals. This was surprising, since the interviews and focus groups – as well as the research that originally generated the PNMs – indicate that networking with peers is the primary reason for attending the meetings. We recognize that we may have phrased this question incorrectly on the post-meeting survey (i.e., "I interacted with other participants."), in that participants reported on their degree of networking rather than on their satisfaction with their degree of networking. In other words, if they were satisfied with their relatively low incidence of networking, then we remain confused. However, if their minimal networking was the result of insufficient time or opportunity, then we could work on developing more or better networking mechanisms. Based on the latter assumption, the final section also elaborates on strategies for cultivating additional networking opportunities. Yet it remains curious that participants reported high levels of satisfaction while reporting low levels of interaction.

Summary

Overall, these findings suggest that PNMs are a successful, peer-oriented professional development opportunity for OST staff, and that specific meeting factors contribute to the degree of goal attainment. The fact that attendance increased 49% from FY08 to FY09 is promising and means that more OST staff attended an event in which they can participate in peer-oriented learning and establish professional relationships. While the data from this study are promising, future meetings can improve by enhancing the quality of the panelists, and by integrating strategic opportunities for meeting participants to network and plan for future collaboration in such activities as small group discussions and speed networking. By integrating such steps into the meetings, it is likely that participants will further increase their knowledge, skill, and belief as well as develop sustainable partnerships. Additionally, OST organizations should pursue systems of accountability in order to ensure that meeting content is not lost. By increasing opportunities for collaboration, it is likely that more participants would use, reinforce, and share their knowledge learned from the meetings.

Recommendations

Based on this study, the OSTRC recommends the following for implementing and enhancing peer networking meetings for OST professionals:

Panelist Recommendations

1. Recruit dynamic, inspiring panelists.
2. Prepare the panelists through in-person or conference call meetings.
3. Encourage panelists to provide tangible tips rather than "showcase' their individual programs.
4. Give panelists specific directions and prompts, and repeatedly emphasize that they adhere to these directives.
5. Actively manage the panel discussion, making sure that panelists do not go over their time allotment or stray too far from the topic.

Networking Recommendations

6. Experiment with initial ice-breakers and other networking strategies.
7. Implement small break-out sessions led by the panelists and moderators.
8. Decrease the networking time in the beginning of the meeting, and inset a networking "break" into the middle of the event.
9. Give the audience a chance to answer a participant question before directing it to the panelists.

Additional Recommendations

10. Expand recruitment strategies to continue to increase attendance at the PNM. Establish an attendance goal for FY2010 to monitor performance.
11. Create mechanisms to encourage and influence attendees' likelihood of engaging in post-meeting activities (e.g., attending an event that was announced at the meeting).
12. Facilitate post-meeting contact between attendees to encourage collaboration between OST programs.
13. Encourage OST organizations to implement mechanisms of accountability to implement information learned at the PNMs and to encourage collaborations and partnerships between the organizations.

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Appendix A: Sample PNM Agenda

December Peer Networking Meeting
For Out-of-School Time (OST) Staff
December 14th, 2009
11:30am-1:30pm

Meeting Agenda

11:30-11:45am
Registration and socializing

11:45-11:50am
Welcome and participant introductions

11:50am-12:00pm
Announcements

12:00-12:50pm
YOUTH-LED CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Panelists:

    Barbara Ferman, Temple Youth Voices, University Community
    Collaboration of Philadelphia

    Hillary Kane, Philadelphia Higher Education Network for
    Neighborhood Development (PHENND)

    Sayeh Hormozi, the Pennsylvania Coalition for Representative
    Democracy (PennCORD) at the National Constitution Center

12:50-1:30pm
Continued socializing

Upcoming Meeting

January 19th, 2009
11:30am-1:30pm

Announcements

- ❖ Check out our Research Highlights on "Youth-led Civic Engagement." If you do not have a copy, it is on the registration table.

- ❖ The OSTRC distributes a Newsletter on the 1st business day of each monthy. To advertise a job opening, event, publication, or other staff resource, please send your item to Katie Derickson, kder@sp2.upenn.edu.

- ❖ We want your feedback! Please complete the provided survey.

Notes