



## What Works? Why Youth Community Action?

### *The Case for Intentionality in Working with At-risk Youth*

CITIZEN U is based on a Youth Community Action (YCA) program model. YCA has been identified by Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) as a 4-H Signature Programs. CCE's Signature Programs are major, statewide efforts addressing widely recognized public concerns. They are exemplars of CCE's mission and are characterized by high quality and impact.

Through YCA-type programs, youth gain skills in six competency domains associated with positive youth development (Eccles & Gootman, 2002): cultural, personal, civic, political, cognitive, and social skills. According to Eccles and Gootman (2002), youth need opportunities to: (1) engage in activities and events that foster skills and competencies; (2) build positive relationships with caring adults; (3) contribute to their community; and (4) have multi-cultural experiences. Research suggests that giving youth social support and helping them understand the importance of civic participation are important in achieving long-term positive youth development outcomes.

Studies have documented that youth participation in YCA programs contribute to a variety of positive developmental outcomes (e.g., increased life skills, increased workforce skills, active engagement in the community through citizenship and leadership) (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2004). YCA programs increase resiliency and protective factors in youth (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 1999; Redd, Cochran, Hair, & Moore, 2002).

Gambone's (2004) research shows statistically significant differences between YCA-type programs and more traditional youth development programs in terms of successfully realizing positive outcomes in civic engagement, community involvement, leadership, and decision-making skills. Eccles, & Gootman (2002) provide strong scientific evidence of the value of youth involvement in community-based programming in terms of fostering positive development through the development of life skills and connections to the community. In addition, youth who remain in YCA programs for more than one year are more likely to thrive than youth who become disengaged after a shorter periods of time (Mead, et al. (1999); Eccles, & Gootman, 2002).

**Physical and Psychological Safety:** CITIZEN U emphasizes the safety, health, and well-being of all youth participants by following the principles of CCE's 4-H Youth Development Program and components of healthy youth/adult partnerships (Camino, 2000). All CITIZEN U project staff are trained in Advancing Youth Development (AYD), CCE's YCA 4-H Signature Program, and the *Public Adventures* curriculum. CITIZEN U promotes the establishment of supportive environments where teens feel safe and are encouraged to express their ideas, thoughts, and feelings. All participating teens and adult partners are asked to co-sign the "CITIZEN U Contract" clearly outlining the expectations for participation in the project.

**Appropriate Structure:** The CITIZEN U Contract establishes rules for behavior, conduct, and participation. The contract, co-authored by the teens and adults, describes standards for mutual responsibilities, trust, respect for ethnic and cultural differences, and provides clear guidelines on participation in the project evaluation. A memorandum of agreement with partnering agencies clearly defines expectations, time commitments, and responsibilities for involvement in the project.

**Supportive Relationships:** CITIZEN U encourages and models warmth, closeness, connectedness, good communication, caring, support, guidance, secure attachment, and responsiveness by adapting the essential components of successful youth/adult partnership programs. These components include: mutual respect between youth /adults, patience for one another, shared leadership between youth and adults, open communication, trust in one another, and commitment to personal growth. Periodic debriefings and frequent CITIZEN U Team meetings create a supportive atmosphere to aid in the experiential learning process inherent in *Public Adventures*. Emphasis is placed on establishing close staff/participant relationships. CITIZEN U embraces the cultural diversity of all teens and their families by respecting, responding with acceptance, and relating to the various cultures represented in the community sites.

**Opportunities to Belong:** Consistent with CCE's 4-H Youth Development values, CITIZEN U promotes opportunities for meaningful inclusion regardless of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, special needs, or disabilities. Teen Leaders have a strong voice in designing their own projects and are given ample opportunities to decide on the projects they wish to undertake. CITIZEN U intentionally plans events to recognize teens for accomplishments and promotes the use of culturally appropriate activities that involve families and community groups. CITIZEN U makes a concerted effort to intentionally involve teens and their families in long-term planning and decision-making, especially in terms of identifying community improvement projects. Both the YCA program model and *Public Adventures* foster the special interests and talents of individuals, and recognize the developmental range of participants' skills and abilities, create opportunities for belonging, and encourage teens to challenge themselves to achieve their potential.

**Positive Social Norms:** Both the *Public Adventures* curriculum and YCA program model promote positive social norms by providing opportunities for teen-determined service learning and civic engagement projects. CITIZEN U is intentionally designed to foster positive interactions and caring relationships between staff and teens and between teen peer groups. The project incorporates cultural diversity through various team-building activities such as retreats, field trips, guest speakers, and other hands-on experiences involved in carrying out community activities and celebrations. Teens engage community members from diverse cultures in order to reflect the project's respect for diversity.

**Support for Efficacy and Mattering:** CITIZEN U's program model and *Public Adventures* curriculum emphasize the development of supports and opportunities for youth to experience a sense of efficacy, connectedness, and mattering. *Public Adventures* focuses on creating opportunities for teens to be self-directing, autonomous, and empowered. Creating youth/adult partnerships and opportunities for leadership through civic engagement are key components of CITIZEN U. By developing strong relationships between teens, caring adults, and community partners, CITIZEN U provides ample opportunities for teens to learn and practice leadership skills.

**Opportunities for Skill Building:** CITIZEN U provides opportunities to learn and practice a variety of skills aligned with positive youth development and the Search Institute's Developmental Assets Model. Teen Leaders are able to achieve self-determined goals and become active citizens in their communities by being involved in skill-building activities that meet identified community needs. Through intentionally planned, hands-on learning experiences, teens have ample opportunities to learn and practice leadership skills, communication, and workforce preparation skills, as well as "real world" opportunities to engage in civic governance. Each step of the *Public Adventures* curriculum leads to concrete "real world" outputs such as mission statements, funding proposals, project budgets, and action plans. Through various experiential learning opportunities and paid summer employment, CITIZEN U Teen Leaders gain the skills that prepare them to be contributing members of and leaders in their community. In addition, Teen Leaders learn workforce readiness skills through paid internships during summers as part of their summer youth employment experience. The following table summarizes the skills today's employers say they are looking for when they hire, and how each of these workforce readiness skills is being developed in CITIZEN U.

## Building Workforce Readiness Skills through CITIZEN U

Workforce Readiness Skills*	At CITIZEN U
<b>Problem Solving:</b> Exercise sound reasoning and analytical thinking; use knowledge, facts, and data to solve workplace problems; apply math and science concepts to problem solving.	<b>Problem Solving:</b> Through intentionally planned, hands-on learning experiences, teens are given ample opportunities to learn and practice problem-solving skills.
<b>Oral Communications:</b> Articulate thoughts, ideas clearly and effectively; have public speaking skills.	<b>Oral Communications:</b> A centerpiece of the 4-H program is public presentations. CITIZEN U Teen Leaders are encouraged and supported to speak within group meeting and publicly.
<b>Written Communications:</b> Write memos, letters and complex technical reports clearly and effectively.	<b>Written Communications:</b> <i>Public Adventures</i> curriculum leads to concrete “real world” written documents such as mission statements, funding proposals, project budgets, and action plans.
<b>Teamwork/Collaboration:</b> Build collaborative relationships with colleagues and customers; be able to work with diverse teams, negotiate and manage conflicts.	<b>Teamwork/Collaboration:</b> CITIZEN U emphasizes supports and opportunities for youth to experience a teamwork, collaboration with adult partners, a sense of efficacy, connectedness, and mattering.
<b>Diversity:</b> Learn from and work collaboratively with individuals representing diverse cultures, races, ages, gender, religions, lifestyles, and viewpoints.	<b>Diversity:</b> CITIZEN U embraces cultural diversity through team-building activities and collaboration with diverse community groups to celebrate and demonstrate respect for diversity.
<b>Information Technology Application:</b> Select and use appropriate technology to accomplish a given task, apply computing skills to problem solving.	<b>Information Technology Application:</b> CITIZEN U integrates technology into the program by focusing on what teens want to do and using technology skills to carry out projects.
<b>Leadership:</b> Leverage the strengths of others to achieve common goals; use interpersonal skills to coach and develop others.	<b>Leadership:</b> Through intentionally planned, hands-on learning experiences, teens have ample opportunities to learn and practice leadership skills.
<b>Creativity/Innovation:</b> Demonstrate originality and inventiveness in work; communicate new ideas to others; integrate knowledge across different disciplines.	<b>Creativity/Innovation:</b> The projects undertaken are youth-determined and youth-led. Creativity is reflected in the unique ideas for the community projects that are undertaken.
<b>Self-direction:</b> Be able to continuously acquire new knowledge and skills; monitor one’s own learning needs; be able to learn from one’s mistakes.	<b>Self-direction:</b> <i>Public Adventures</i> focuses on creating opportunities for teens to be self-directing, autonomous, and empowered.
<b>Work Ethic:</b> Demonstrate personal accountability, effective work habits, e.g., punctuality, working productively with others, and time and workload management.	<b>Work Ethic:</b> CITIZEN U Teen Leaders are hired as employees by Cornell Cooperative Extension for the summer. They sign contracts that establish accountability and performance expectations.
<b>Social Responsibility:</b> Demonstrate integrity and ethical behavior; act responsibly with the interests of the larger community in mind.	<b>Social Responsibility:</b> CITIZEN U encourages and models warmth, closeness, connectedness, good communication, caring, support, and guidance.

\* Adapted from *Are They Really Ready To Work? Employers’ Perspectives on the Basic Knowledge and Applied Skills of New Entrants to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century U.S. Workforce* (2006). The Conference Board, Inc., the Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, Corporate Voices for Working Families, and the Society for Human Resource Management. [http://www.p21.org/storage/documents/FINAL\\_REPORT\\_PDF09-29-06.pdf](http://www.p21.org/storage/documents/FINAL_REPORT_PDF09-29-06.pdf)