

Views from VanDeWalle

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Helping Youth Thrive through Travel Experiences

Those who regularly read my column or work in the 4-H youth development field might remember articles I've previously written about the 4-H Thrive Model. Having the opportunity to take youth to a National Citizenship Washington Focus Trip (CWF) and now have assisted in chaperoning two international travel experiences, I have witnessed some valuable skills youth learn. There is literature that shows the benefits of youth traveling. For example, Sutton, Miller, & Rubin (2007) have categorized three key areas where youth benefit from travel: knowledge/skills, development and life choices.

The 4-H Thrive Model has several different levels and ways in which it intentionally develops positive long-term outcomes. First, let's take the CWF program which is a capstone, signature 4-H program. It is built on the developmental context of helping youth develop sparks, a sense of belonging, develop relationships and becoming engaged. One of the strengths of the CWF program is the preparation that occurs prior to the capstone trip to Washington D.C. Youth meet several times to learn more about themselves, others they will travel with, citizenship skills and expanding their knowledge of the world.

As with all 4-H programs, including travel experiences, they strive to promote a growth mindset, openness to challenge and discovery, develop a sense of hopeful purpose, pro social orientation, transcendent awareness, positive emotions, and how to set and manage goals. Let's examine how a travel experience helps to fulfill these goals. When youth put forth the effort, traveling can expand their mind and discover other viewpoints and encourage them to discover new ideas. Youth can develop a sense of who they are and develop a sense of their own personal mission and purpose. When youth travel and are exposed to situations where others might be less fortunate than themselves or view others' challenges, they can work to create a positive change. When youth experience different careers or industries, it can create a spark either towards one of those career pathways, or help them understand how various careers are connected or even help them decide if that career is not something they would really enjoy pursuing. Finally, if youth reflect on what they have learned or experienced, it can evoke a sense of goals they wish to pursue.

Finally, with a positive youth development experience, as described in the Thrive model, developmental outcomes that are desired to be achieved are developing a positive academic attitude, social competence, personal standards, connection with others, personal responsibility and contribution. Let's explore how traveling can achieve this. First, traveling with other peers can help one achieve social competence. For example, when placed in somewhat uncomfortable situations, setting aside personal differences and leaning on someone when needed can expand one's personal growth. When actively listening and engaging in tours, youth can expand and use that knowledge to enhance their academic or technical knowledge in both formal and informal settings. Being responsible by following the travel agenda, packing/unpacking, budgeting money and following instructions can help youth achieve personal responsibility. Youth cannot only develop a deeper connection with familiar peers, but have the chance to meet and make new friends, potentially for a lifetime. I have also sometimes experienced when youth see different social norms (I.e. more environmentally conscious, public transportation, etc.) and it makes them think about ways they can positively contribute to society, starting with themselves and their families.

In summary, while some youth may experience more personal development than others, more than likely every youth will experience some form of growth, especially when exposed to International or other travel experiences. At one point in their lives, it is likely a travel opportunity through positive youth organizations or educational travel opportunities will enhance youths' personal development at some point in their lives.