

Executive Summary

Purpose

The purpose of this report is to help the Rural Resources Farm & Food Teen Training Program staff, trainers, community partners, and funders better understand: (1) the accomplishments of the Farm & Food Teen Training Program, (2) the level of satisfaction with the program among current participants, parents, and alumni, (3) the impacts the program has had on participants, their families, alumni, and the larger Greene County community, and (4) ways to improve the program in the future.

What Was Accomplished?

By the numbers the Farm & Food Teen Training Program completed the accomplishments below. Note that the 2016 program year is half complete at the time of this writing; 2016 data is provided as appropriate.

- In 2015 and 2016 respectively, 42 and 46 teens were enrolled
- In 2015, 299 hours of classes were offered and 1,987 training hours were given
- Sixteen teens received business training
- Six teens ran a rabbitry business in 2015
- Thirty-three teens have and work a garden at home
- Teens went on one leadership retreat and one site visit to a farm to table restaurant
- In 2015 and 2016, two interns served at community organizations; eight served at Rural Resources



How Well Was It Done?

When surveyed about their satisfaction in the program, 23 out of 26 teens were “satisfied” or “very satisfied;” all parents said they were either “satisfied” or “very satisfied.” Asked to rate the staff, 22 out of 26 current teens noted they were either “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the staff. All 10 parents indicated they were very satisfied with the staff. Twenty-three out of 26 teens were “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with program trainers and farmers.

What Has Changed?

Five major outcomes emerged from focus group conversations and the surveys:

- Increased skills and knowledge related to content areas
- Increased leadership, communication, and life skills
- Increased food security and healthier eating habits
- Increased career aspiration and opportunities
- Benefits extend to the community during and after graduating from the program

What Could Be Improved?

Focus group participants (teens, parents, and alumni) shared the following suggestions for improvement:

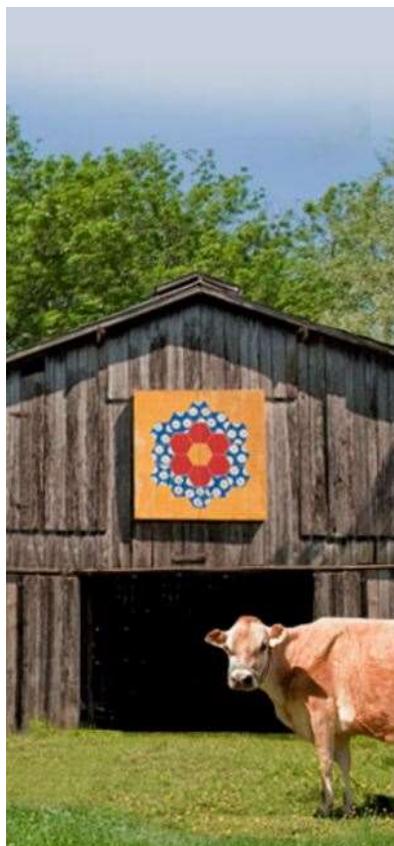
- Meet at more often
- Organize more leadership retreats
- Reach and enroll more at-risk teens
- Perform more outreach in the community
- Acquire additional funding for more program staff and transportation

Rural Resources Organizational Overview

Rural Resources is a farm-based organization located in Greene County in Northeast Tennessee that connects farms, food and families. It does so through several different programs, described below.

The Gardens and CSA

In 2016, Rural Resources became an incubator for River House Farm, which plans to grow 250 varieties of fruits, vegetables and herbs. The River House Farm's Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program grows its produce on two Rural Resources garden spaces. A third garden serves as an educational space for youth. During the summer, recent graduates of the Farm & Food Training Program are selected as interns, working and learning in the garden. All teens from the Farm & Food Teen Training Program participate in educational activities within the garden.



Farm Day Camp

The camp is a summertime experience for young people ages 4 to 12. Each summer, multiple week-long sessions are held for different age groups that include milking cows, making butter, gardening, arts and crafts, exploring creek life, cooking, caring for chickens and goats, and having fun on the farm.

Four Seasons Grazing Club

This club is an educational and networking group that provides opportunities for livestock producers to visit local and regional farms to learn about innovative practices using rotational grazing, fencing, and watering systems. Frequent discussion topics include marketing, growing new foods, and animal health.

Farm & Food Teen Training Program

The Farm & Food Teen Training Program targets economically at-risk teens and teaches key concepts related to every stage of the farm-to-table process, as well as critical business skills, in a four to five-year comprehensive educational experience. Groups of teens participate in a multi-year program, which begins with learning to grow vegetables and raise small livestock at the Rural Resources Farm. The following year, teens train with local chefs to learn cooking skills. Finally, for two years, Rural Resources supports the teens to choose and develop a farm or food related business where they learn business and leadership skills. Once teens receive this training, they have an opportunity to intern at Rural Resources or with a partner organization in the community.

Evaluation Description

Evaluation Methods

The 2016 evaluation was conducted with teens, parents, and alumni of the Farm & Food Teen Training Program. The first evaluation with the interviewer took place with alumni of the program on June 16, 2016; nine teens attended. Six additional alumni completed the survey and focus group questions through an online questionnaire. The total responses numbered 14. All alumni represented program participants who graduated before 2014 in order to understand the program's longer-term impacts on participants.



The second evaluation with the interviewer took place on June 23 with four groups of current teens and one group of parents. The total number of current teens surveyed was 26; the total number of surveyed parents was 10. It should be noted that 14 parents attended the focus group, but they represented 10 households since four husband and wife couples attended. The interviewer asked each household to complete one survey. These participants represented teens and parents that are currently active in the program.

Teens in the focus groups were divided into the number of years they have been in the program (first through fourth year). In the fourth year group, an alumni who is interning for Rural Resources also joined the group.

Each group completed a short survey before participating in a semi-structured focus group conversation. Focus group conversations were taped, after the moderator explained that the tapes would be kept confidential and secured verbal permission from all participants. Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions about the purpose, structure, and context of the evaluation. Each focus group lasted between 35 and 60 minutes.

This report was created from compiled survey data and multiple reviews of the audio files. The moderator synthesized the audio files from each conversation, highlighting themes that developed across the groups and identifying specific statements and examples provided by participants. All images in this report are used with permission from the participants.

Principal Evaluation Questions

All the questions asked in surveys and focus groups served to prompt responses that answer the principal evaluation questions below.

- What was accomplished?
- How well was it done?
- What has changed?
- What could be improved?

Results & Discussion

The graphs below represent the survey data from 50 respondents. The following discussion brings to life the program's larger impact using focus group information and stories to highlight the presented data.

What Was Accomplished?

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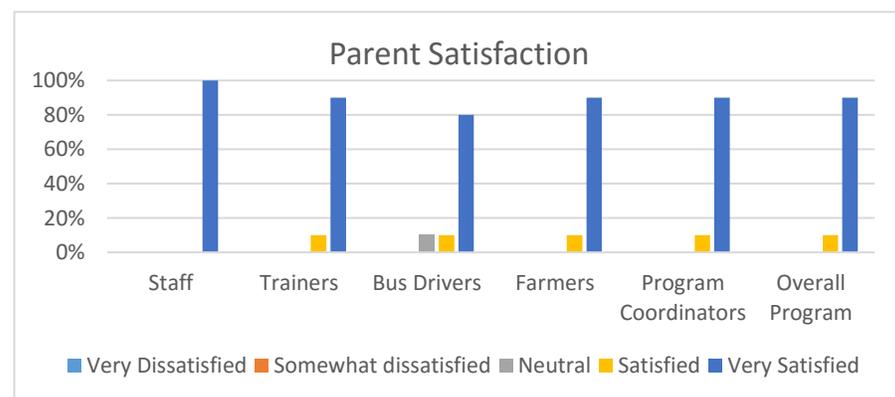
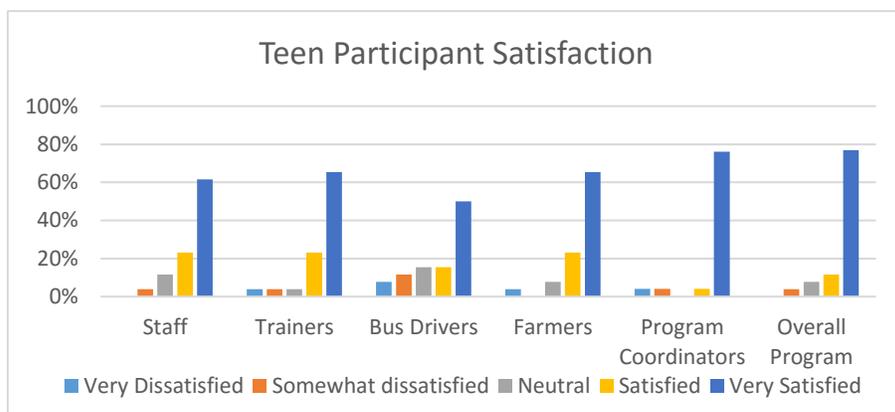
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How Well Was It Done?

The survey of 26 teens and 10 parents assessed their level of satisfaction with the overall program and people with whom the teens worked; the graphs to the right display their responses.

Twenty-three teens stated they were "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the overall program. Staff, trainers, farmers, and coordinators all received similarly positive satisfaction ratings. Out of 26 teens, 22 noted they were either "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the staff. Twenty-three out of 26 teens were "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with trainers and farmers.

All 10 parents were "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the overall program. All 10 said they were "very satisfied" with staff. In focus groups, parents, teens, and alumni spoke highly favorably of the staff, trainers and others they worked with in the program.



What Has Changed?

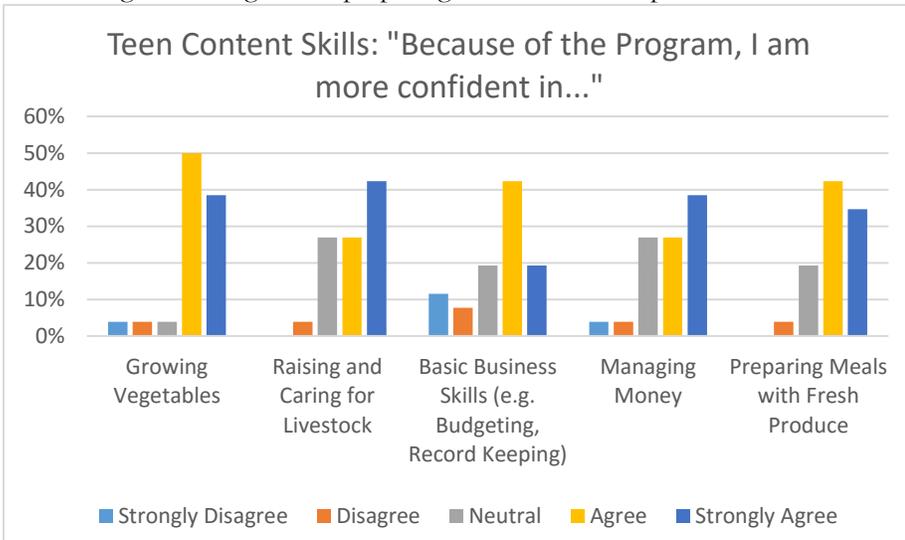
In the surveys and the focus groups, questions asked how confident current and former teens are in various areas of their lives, what has changed as a result of the program, and how the program impacts the larger community. Parents responded from their perspective seeing their child grow as a result of being in the program. When the survey and focus group responses were synthesized, the following five themes emerged:

- Increased skills and knowledge related to content areas
- Increased leadership, communication, and life skills
- Increased food security and healthier eating habits
- Increased career aspiration and opportunities
- Benefits extend to the family and community during and after graduating from the program

Increased Skills and Knowledge Related to Content Areas

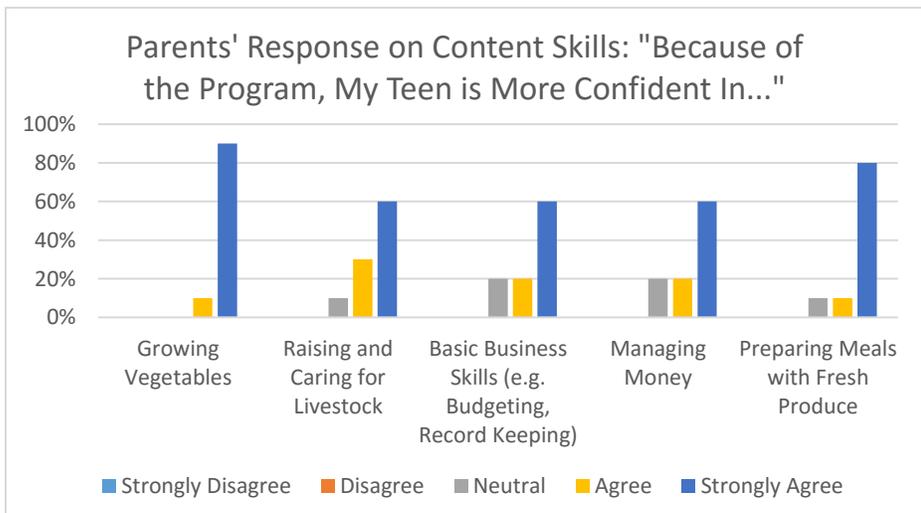
Teens indicated that they have more confidence in content-related skills they learn in the program. Parents notice the change when their teens come home using those skills to help around the house. Overall, the skills learned helped them to have a deeper understanding of where their food comes from and how it's made.

Teens and Parents: Teens shared how much they enjoyed the experience of learning new skills during the program. They were excited about vegetables growing in their gardens, the new recipes they knew, and their experiences selling at the market. When the 26 teens rated their confidence in content-related skills, 23 answered “strongly agree” or “agree” that they are more confident growing vegetables; 20 answered “strongly agree” or “agree” to preparing meals with fresh produce.



Parents noted teens’ growth and creativity in the program as well. Their responses showed that at least eight out of 10 “agree” or “strongly agree” that they see their teen having more confidence in all these skills.¹

In focus groups, teens couldn’t wait to share the recipes they learned and what was growing well in their gardens. Teens were especially proud to grow fresh produce using natural methods like vermicomposting and natural pest management. They also enjoyed cooking together with their class as well as bringing their skills home to contribute to their family meals. One respondent spoke about how she has started to cook dinner for her large family, rather than order take-out, because her mom works late. Retelling this, she quotes herself as if she had just made the dinner, saying, **“I made this and it tastes really good. I feel accomplished!”** One parent also noted her teen’s **“creativity”** in the kitchen, saying **“The food she makes is really good. It just tastes so fresh!”**

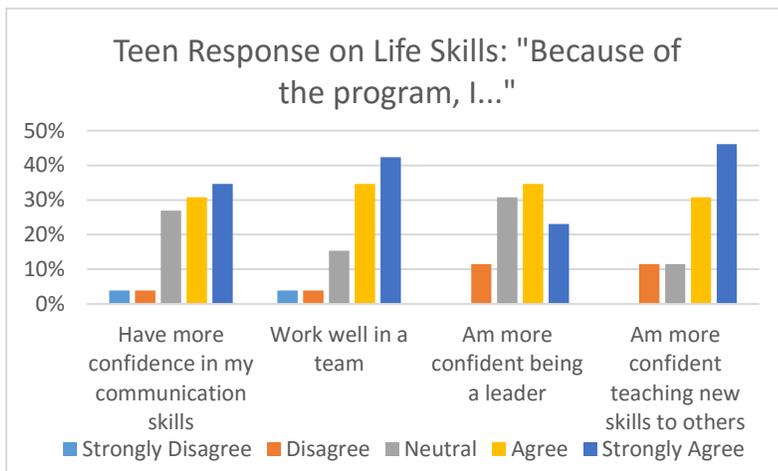


Several teens appreciated the opportunity to learn how to manage money. One respondent said she used to **“always spend right away what I had”** before the program, but she now buys things she wants *and* needs. When Alumni were asked how they manage their finances, ten out of 14 said they “agree” or “strongly agree” that they manage their finances well.

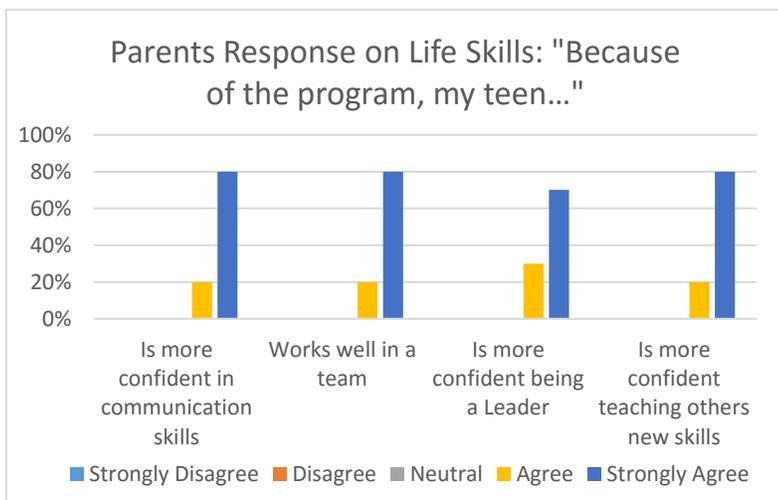
¹ Please note that some of the teens’ confidence in several of these skills are lower in part because teens are involved in more activities as they progress each year. In general, teens who answered “neutral” expected to learn the stated skill at a later date.

Increased leadership, communication, and life skills

Surveyed about how teens have changed as a result of being in the program, teens, parents, and alumni noted that they work better in teams, lead more, communicate well, and teach others skills they learned (see charts to the right for current teens, parents, and alumni). In focus groups, teens, parents, and alumni spoke at length about how the program increased their leadership and communication skills and helped them grow into productive members of society. Respondents from all focus groups echoed the value of the skills they learned and painted a picture where teens have lifelong friendships, memories, and essential skills for their future success.



Teens: Several teens shared how the program’s leadership retreat helped them listen to their peers more, consider their ideas, problem-solve around differences, and work well as a team to meet a common goal. Recalling one retreat at the Longview Ranch, one respondent said, **“I learned to let everyone have a try to say what they think... I got better at listening to everyone else.”** For this teen, he said that when he learned to listen to people, he doesn’t **“get frustrated”** anymore and is now **“more patient”** with his peers. Several teens also shared that the leadership retreat and the entire program helped quiet teens find their voice. One teen said of her sister (also in the focus group) that before, her sister wouldn’t talk to anyone, yet **“now she’s making friends, talking to strangers even...so it’s done wonders for her.”**

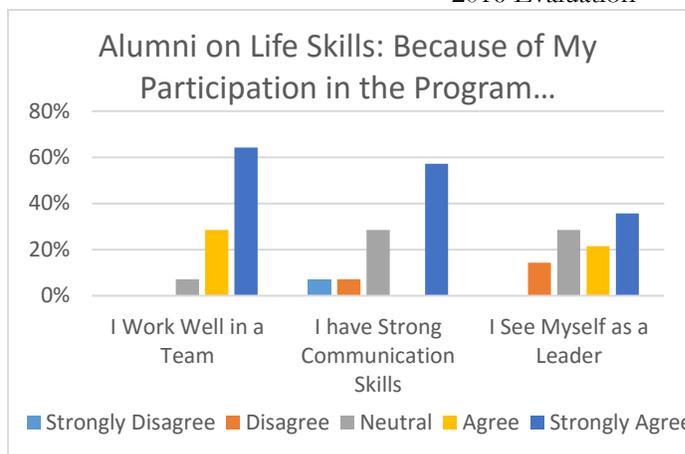


Parents: Parents concurred that they have witnessed their teens get more confident, take more responsibility, and show leadership at home as a result of the program. For example, a mother of a teen with autism said that she has seen her teen do a **“180 degree turn in the program.”** Another parent told of a time she beamed with pride after witnessing her youngest daughter capture the undivided attention of the Undersecretary of USDA Rural Development at a groundbreaking ceremony. **“I could just see [my daughter] was just ‘talk, talk, talk, talk, talk.’ She just was talking about all these great things they have to do [at Rural Resources] and it really impressed [the Undersecretary]. We were really proud of how she came through.”**

“That increased sense of responsibility; knowing that if they don’t take care of the animals, they will die. And [our daughters] bring that home. Our girls know that if they don’t wash their clothes, they won’t have clean clothes.”
~Parent

In the surveys, seven out of 10 parents “strongly agree” that their teens are more confident being a leader; three out of 10 indicated they “agree.” One parent elaborated, **“Our oldest daughter is in a management position and she has just really thrived with her leadership, and I fully feel that she got that from Rural Resources.”**

Alumni: Alumni have also continued to value the time they spent in the Farm & Food Teen Training Program for the softer skills they learned while there. In alumni surveys, 13 out of 14 respondents said they “agree” or “strongly agree” that they work well in a team because of the program. One focus group participant remarked, **“I’m a very shy person, and have a lot of anxiety but this program helped a lot with that since everything you do is done by teamwork.”**

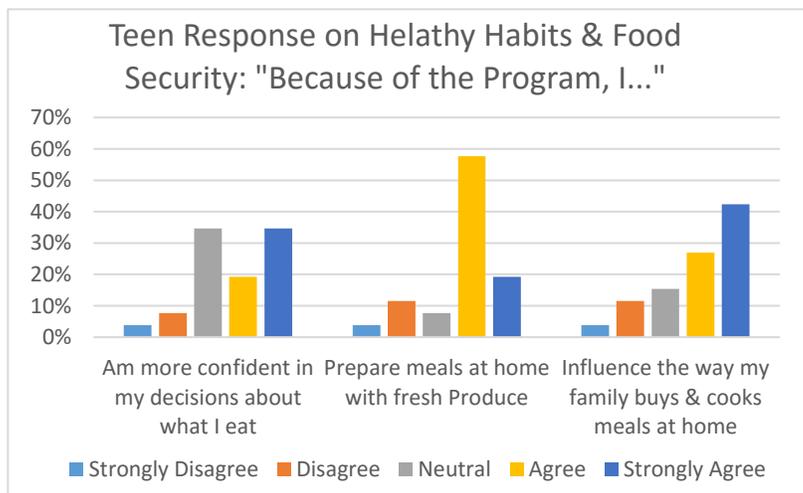


While a lower majority – eight out of 14 alumni – said they “agree” or “strongly agree” with the statements about having strong communication skills and seeing themselves as a leader because of the program, alumni still spoke about using those skills in various activities in their lives. **“I’ve been able to help manage group projects in college where I plan, divide up the work, and ensure we create a good, solid product. As the leader of the group, I knew from Rural Resources that I needed to let people work at their own pace and do it the way they want to do it.”** Another alumnus told about an instance when she took up her leadership to help raise money for the program’s Chopped competition. In the process of reaching out to a particular donor, she spoke with such enthusiasm for the program that she has now developed a good relationship with this donor. Since then, it has turned into a business relationship after the alumni started a catering business: the donor has asked her to cater his daughter’s wedding.

Increased Food Security and Healthier Eating Habits

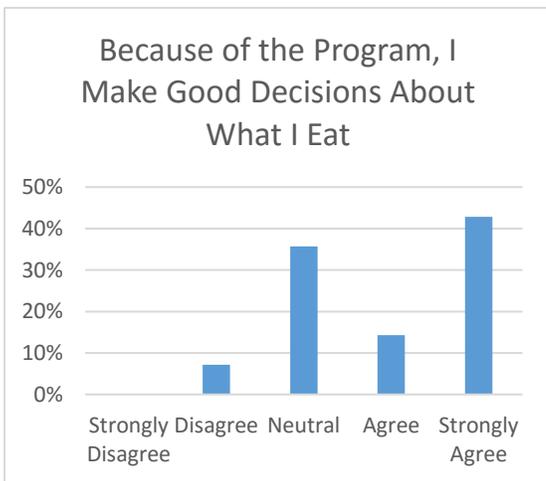
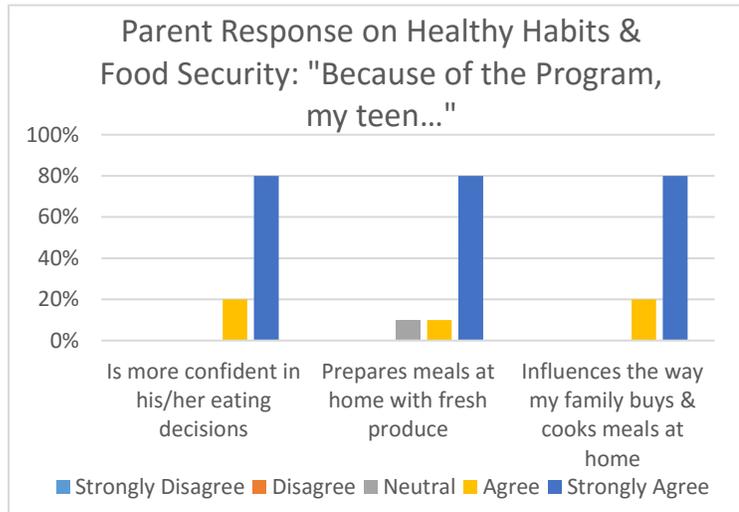
Current and past participants and families spoke of improved food security and healthier habits thanks to the hands-on experiences that demonstrate the farm to table process. The program has also built a garden in every teen’s household, which has been especially impactful to encourage continued application of their skills and engage the whole family.

Teens: As in the graph to the right, most of the teens report having more confidence in their eating decisions, preparing meals at home with fresh produce, and influencing their families’ food habits.

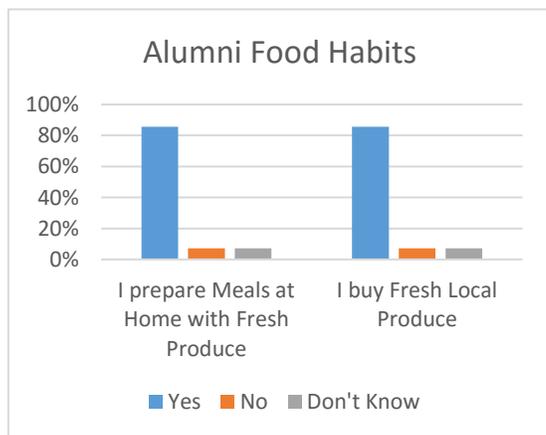


As confirmation that the program is achieving its goal to improve food security, teens unquestionably recognized the benefit of growing their own food to supplement their food purchases. One respondent remarked, **“Before the program my family never really wanted to farm or have gardens. So in our first year about farming, they taught us how to take care of soil and now we have a really nice garden at home. We’re able to cook really, really nice meals with stuff that we grew.”** Teens are also learning that they can supplement their family’s food budget with produce grown in their garden whether it is in season or not. **“If money’s really tight or something happens where you can’t pay that much to get enough food, if you preserve [what you grow] you can use it for a certain amount of time – that’s been very useful for us.”**

Parents: Parents raved about how seeing their teen garden and cook delicious meals has also improved their eating habits and saved them money. Not only did at least eight out of 10 parents “strongly agree” that their teen is more confident about food decisions and preparing home-cooked meals (see chart to the right), all voiced during the focus group that they have been influenced by their teens. They have learned about gardening, trying new foods, and the amount of additives that go into processed foods. Several parents stated that they won’t eat from fast food restaurants anymore.



Alumni: When surveyed about their food habits and eating decisions, 12 out of 14 alumni indicated they prepare home-cooked meals with fresh produce and buy fresh local produce. At the same time, eight alumni either “agree” or “strongly agree” that they make good decisions about what they eat because of the Farm & Food Teen Training Program. During focus group conversation, one participant said, **“I eat a lot of different food now, but I used to be really picky...I don’t waste food anymore, and I try to compost if I have to throw things away.”** The same respondent said that she uses **“the waste of my pet rabbit to fertilize the garden.”**



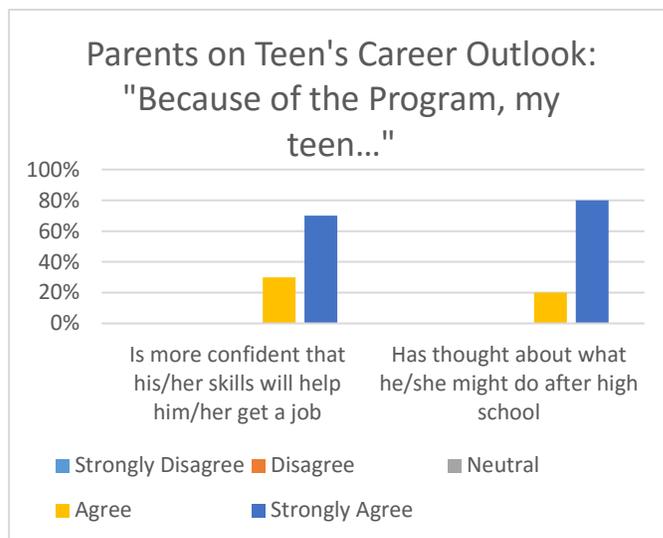
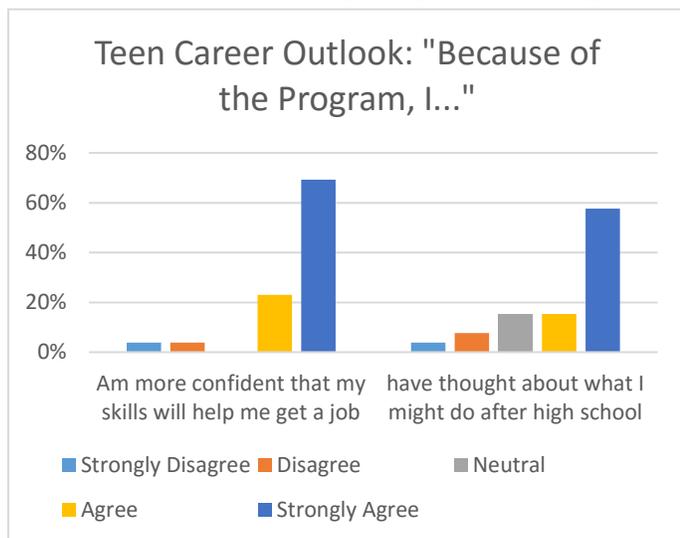
Alumni also recognized the importance of supporting local farmers, thus supporting the broader local community. One alumnus said, **“I can now support local fresh shops or [grow food] myself.”** This sentiment is echoed in alumni responses to how frequently they buy local produce, where only two out of 14 said they don’t buy any fresh local produce, eight buy monthly, and 4 buy weekly. Additionally, the alumni use multiple locations to buy local produce, including grocery stores (10 out of 14), farmers markets (6 out of 14), and roadside stands (5 out of 14). Similarly, alumni agreed during the focus group that they are grateful for the fresh produce over **“corporate produce”** for its better taste.

“It really showed me the difference in the taste of fresh foods vs. foods that have been mass-produced and shipped on a truck. It's cheaper, better tasting, and I will teach my children how to grow and make their own foods because of it.”

~Alumni

Increased Career Aspiration and Opportunities

Taken together, the content-related skills teens learn, the life skills they gain, and the connections and opportunities the program offers have inspired confidence and drive towards putting the skills to use in a future career. Whether they intend to pursue a career in food, farming, or an unrelated path, teens, their parents, and alumni understand the value of having the skills that attract employers, like good communication, leadership and problem-solving skills, and patience.



Teens and Parents: When surveyed about their skills and employability, 24 out of 26 teens “agree” or “strongly agree” that, as a result of their development and learning in the program, the experience will help them get a job. Similarly, all ten parents either “strongly agree” or “agree” on the same question.

In a county with below average high school graduation rates, teens credit the program with keeping them out of trouble and interested in something productive. Even more, they are motivated by learning what their skills are and the connections they make to opportunities in the community. Several teens mentioned that they want to be a chef, work with animals, or help **“those in need”** in the community. Several others spoke specifically about their plans to go to college. Parents echoed these sentiments and were especially thankful that the program helped their teens appreciate how college can further hone their understanding of the world around them.

“I’ve seen some of these kids go through the program and come out with bigger goals than if they didn’t have the program. They can see themselves doing more than work at a fast food place.”
~Parent

Alumni: Of the 14 alumni surveyed, seven are currently employed (2 more are in school). Of the seven employed, six said that the skills they learned at Rural Resources helped them get a job. One respondent noted, **“This program sticks out on a resumé and opens up a dialogue about what I have learned.”** Additionally, at least three alumni have considered attending Berea College, two will attend/are attending, and the alumni attribute the opportunity to their time in the program.

Six out of 14 alumni stated that participating in the program has influenced their current or planned career path, whether in food, farming, or a food-related business. In fact, one alumnus spoke in a focus group about how the program helped her start a catering business. **“I loved cooking before, but I fell in love with cooking even more by that second year...I never knew how to do a resume or business plan until I got to this program. This program has helped me figure out so much more about what I want to do in life...It’s not just the cooking and the farming, it’s the business aspect”** that helped accelerate her business plan. Other alumni agreed that the program planted a seed of interest in food or farming, which only recently blossomed into intent to pursue a job or career in that area.

Benefits Extend to the Community During and After Graduating from the Program

Throughout the focus groups, participants provided example after example of how the Farm & Food Teen Training Program serves the community. In addition, there was a sentiment that the program is leaving a legacy of grounded, collaborative people in Greene County and beyond.

Teens: Part of building a legacy is getting teens to work and serve in the community. The program regularly caters church events, sells fresh vegetables at the farmer's market, and conducts cooking demonstrations at community events. One teen recalled, **"We cooked a Thanksgiving meal and got to serve it to people in the community...it was nice to talk to the people eating our food and to see how they liked it."** Other teens expressed similar enthusiasm for serving food to people in need. Overall, they thought it was fulfilling and meaningful to see the fruits of their labor shared with the community. Several alumni receive internships with other community organizations or at Rural Resources where they continue to grow their network of mentors. These interns appreciate the opportunity to continue their learning and commitment to the community and make more connections that lead to gainful employment later.

Parents: Parents, from their unique perspective, benefit from seeing the full range of their teen's positive growth and were thrilled about how a whole cohort of program alumni could benefit the community. They spoke about how they see the program developing youth into productive, leaderful adults who also have employable skills. During the focus group with parents, there was clear consensus that this program was vital not only to providing youth with something positive to do and look forward to, but also instill participants with good values. One parent summed up the sentiment in the room to say, **"It will produce people that are educated in a way that they wouldn't have otherwise been able to obtain during the 8am-2pm school day. They will have more integrity...and fellowship, and morals and ethics. If we just sprinkle that around everywhere, we'd be great."**

"The program is creating responsible, upstanding citizens."

~Parent

Alumni: An example of what the program makes possible is the story of one alumna who has started a catering business with her mom. Faced with the struggle of finding good work in the area and given the opportunity to find out what she was interested in, she got creative with her mom and forged a path of their own. Her mom explained, **"By the time you get out [of the program], you can have a full-fledged business of your own. Because in Greene County, [my daughter] couldn't go find a job anywhere. So therefore, we made one, and it's working! And we're loving it; it's our passion."** She also stated, **"I don't think we would have been as far thought out, business-wise, with what we're doing with catering if it wasn't for this [program]."** While this is one example, there are several others that demonstrate how this program has helped teens uncover their passions and open up doors to further education, jobs and internships.

"I also think it has been a great program for teens. I loved it. And I know of teens in the groups that were into trouble, but this program helped them. It was a learning experience, but it was also fun which made all of us teens look forward to that rather than the next thing to get into. I just can't put into words how great I think this program is for teens."

~Alumni

What Could Be Improved?

In the focus groups, teens, parents, and alumni thought so highly of the program that they wanted to expand it in the following ways:

- **Meet at more often on the farm.** Teens currently meet twice per month on the farm and still crave more opportunities to do hands-on learning with their peers and continue to deepen their skills.
- **Organize more leadership retreats.** The retreats create what amounts to life-changing experiences for some program participants and ample positive memories for all.
- **Reach and enroll more teens, especially those who are more at-risk.** For all the difference the program makes in teens' lives, participants want to share that experience with more people in the community. Parents pointed out that involving more teens in the hands-on learning will produce more teens to mature into responsible, driven adults.
- **Perform more outreach that makes the case for the program's value to the community.** Build partnerships with more local businesses and organizations to create synergy among partners and open up more avenues for internship locations.

In conjunction with any sort of expansion, the parents, teens, and alumni recognized that the Farm & Food Teen Training Program also needs additional funding for staff and transportation to make the list above possible. While all respondents shared many words of praise for the staff, particularly the Program Director, Ms. Debbie, they also hoped that more staff could take some of the burden off of Ms. Debbie's shoulders. Freeing up the Director would help accomplish at least two things: (1) enable her to use her expertise to develop trust and relationships with teens and (2) generate more institutional memory within the program so that it can sustain beyond its current leadership. Funding for more transportation would also reduce the time each teen spends on the bus, waiting for their class to begin, or for the bus to drop them back home. Respondents recommended that, to make the case for additional funding, more of the community needs to understand the impact and value the program has on teens, their families, and the Greene County area.

Overall Impact and Conclusions

The Farm & Food Teen Training Program has operated for eight years and has had significant impact on individual teens, their families, and the community. The community has faced many of the challenges that other areas in Central Appalachia face, including the loss or significant reduction in traditional industries that supplied the bulk of its employment, brain drain of educated youth, poor health of its citizens, and high unemployment. Yet, this program helps youth see and create a viable way to thrive in place.

The pairing of hard and soft skills is critical to helping the teens retain and get excited about what they've learned. At the same time that teens learn employable skills like growing vegetables, preparing fresh produce, business development, and managing money, they learn about how to communicate well, listen, and lead towards a collaborative vision. What keeps teens coming back and enthusiastic is that they learn by doing, they learn what interests them, and they have fun through it all. This has produced teens and young adults who are clearer about where their skills lie and more hopeful about what career path they want to pursue.

The impact of the program extends to teens' families and the broader community as well. Since teens have connected to food in a healthy way by growing their own produce and eating healthier, they bring those habits home. Not only are the teens and families more food secure, teens are confident that they can make meals for their families and contribute to the household. In the same way, when the teens grow into adults, they can gradually break the cycle of poverty by creating their own jobs or taking on leadership positions using the skills and values they learned in the program. This is more than a teen development program; it is a hopeful avenue for sustainable community revitalization.

A Special Thank you to the Sponsors of the Rural Resources Farm & Food Teen Training Program



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