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## Out of the Inbox and Into the Streets

**By Karen Pittman**

Column time: I reached for the “recent research” inbox and pulled out five studies – three national surveys, two major evaluations – and started to read, looking for common themes. Good stuff.

But when it came time to write, what hit me was not the richness of the information, rich as it was, but the wasted opportunities. Looking at the executive summaries of millions of dollars of research, I was struck by two things. First, that too few of us would read these reports or even hear summaries of the findings. Second, that this situation could be improved.

Five major reports from five different youth-serving organizations with different sponsors, pollsters and evaluators, and, most importantly, independent dissemination strategies. I understand why this happens. But is it the best way to build public awareness, advance the field's knowledge base or sustain research efforts? Is it even the best way to galvanize change within individual organizations? At the risk of raising ire, I have to say that I don't think so.

Two examples:

Let's start with Youth Development Strategies Inc.'s evaluation of Boys & Girls Clubs' Triple Play Program on healthy eating, exercise and developmental outcomes (Promoting Healthy Lifestyles, 2009, Gambone and co-authors at Youth Development Strategies Inc.). Solid study design (Triple Play clubs versus control clubs). Solid study results: Knowledge improved, healthy eating and exercise habits improved, especially among those with the poorest habits; developmental outcomes improved (peer interactions, sense of mastery), club culture and structure improved (attrition slowed, youths' self-reported experiences were rated higher).

Incredibly important program model: Clubs were not asked to implement a menu of stand-alone activities, they were encouraged to “infuse the club environment” with supports and opportunities related to the three goals. Yet the findings were consistent across a range of clubs that took different approaches, served diverse populations and had varying levels of resources.

This study is big news. But who's breaking it down for local or even national funders and practitioners? Who's making sure that the story line isn't just “BGCA Triple Play Program Hits a Home Run,” but also “Small Intentional Changes Can Yield Big Outcomes?” Making the case for broader implications isn't Boys & Girls Clubs' job. So the lessons get lost in the shadows.

Let's move to a different type of study, the Girl Scouts' Good Intentions: The Beliefs and Values of Teens and Tweens Today. This is a significant national survey, chock full of important findings, unique because it compares the values of today's seventh- through 12th-graders to those of their predecessors 20 years ago. (A few teasers for those who haven't read it: Today's teens are more likely to abstain from premarital sex, refuse a drink, not cheat on a test and continue a friendship with a friend who comes out as gay or lesbian. They are more likely to seek advice from adults, especially parents, and are more willing to speak their minds.) Girl Scouts paid extra to have Harris Interactive conduct focus groups of girls and to include a sample of mothers in the study to allow for mother-daughter analyses. But the national survey was of more than 3,000 girls and boys, both in and out of Girl Scouting.

The study was released in December and got modest press. The National Collaboration for Youth sponsored a webinar for members. All good efforts. But communications experts will tell you that the way to get this information understood is to feed it to the public (and the field) in small bites served with examples, recommendations and other related facts. It's a safe bet that this type of outreach wasn't in the Girl Scouts' budget. Another study lost in the shadows.

Even if we assume that the organizations that mount the studies have their needs met, I would argue that we, "the field," are wasting the gifts that these organizations hand us. I know we could do more if we had better mechanisms for thinking about common measures, joint data collection, co-branding and viral communications options, before the studies are launched. But we can do more even with the completed studies.

Other fields suffer from the same challenges as the youth field – lots of independent organizations, lots of potential facts and messages, limited funding for communications. Some, like early childhood development and the environment, have pooled resources to create disciplined research dissemination and communications functions. Most media consultants credit the "big for their size" impact of the environmental groups to their central organizing structure. And many of us are aware of the results that the communications discipline Phil Sparks and his colleagues from the Communications Consortium Media Center brought to early childhood.

It feels ludicrous to suggest a new "collaborative venture" when money is so tight. But my inbox is full. It's time for us to aim beyond the inbox and get our messages into the fields and into the streets.

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Karen Pittman is President and CEO of the Forum for Youth Investment. An expanded version of this column and links to related readings are available at <http://www.forumfyi.org>.