The Excellence in Youth Programming (Excel) Initiative conducts youth program evaluation; providing feedback, coaching, and training to increase the quality of youth program delivery. The backbone of Excel is the Youth Development Observational Tool (YDOT) which allows for the virtual assessment of program staff who work with children and youth ages 9-18 years. The YDOT also allows Excel to provide structured feedback to programs.

Excel has several unique features, including a virtual platform and a focus on the relationships between adults and youth participating in after-school programs. Offering structured assessment and interaction online eliminates expenses, provides convenient access for programs around the globe, and allows for unobtrusive assessment of worker-youth interactions. Excel is also integrated into a broader network of resources, tools, and research for those working with children and youth ages 9-18.

Importance of Excel

Although school is a major source of support and structure for youth, young people spend approximately 80% of their time outside of school (School’s Out Washington, 2008). During early adolescence, young people spend a great deal of time in organized youth programs. It is estimated that over 8 million children and youth participate in after-school programs annually, and over 14 million engage in such programming over the summer (Afterschool Alliance, 2009). As such, these programs have tremendous potential to provide meaningful support that can contribute to positive youth development. Further, involvement in positive, structured programs may decrease the potential for youth to engage in risky, negative behaviors (Mahoney & Statin, 2000).

Although it is hoped that young people benefit generally from youth programming, research has found that positive outcomes are only seen when such services are of high quality (Borden, Scholmer, & Wiggs, 2011). The relationships between workers and youth can provide a pathway to positive youth development (Serido, Borden, & Perkins, 2009). Thus, dedicating specific resources to ensuring excellence in youth programs is vital to youth outcomes. Specifically, improving the quality of youth programs has the potential to have positive ripple effects across a variety of life domains—academic achievement, social emotional and life skills development, health and well-being, and civic engagement can also be improved for young people (Borden & Perkins, 2006; Hamilton, Hamilton, & Pittman, 2004; Mahoney, Cairn, & Farmer, 2003; Walsh, 2007).

Youth Development Observational Tool

The YDOT observational tool is grounded in research focused on the eight key elements of high quality out-of-school programs (Eccles & Gootman, 2002):

1. Physical and psychological safety
2. Supportive relationships
3. Opportunities to belong
4. Positive social norms
5. Appropriate structure
6. Support for efficacy and matters
7. Opportunities for skill building
8. Integration of family, school, and community efforts

Development of the YDOT was guided by the youth development literature (Borden, Scholmer, & Wiggs, 2011) and items were designed to assess the key elements needed within after-school programs to promote the positive development of young people.

Excel Initiative

Procedurally, the Excel initiative begins with youth programs identifying three staff members who upload three separate 10-minute videos to the secure online platform developed for Excel. In order to capture a full range of staff youth programming skills and activities, each of the 10-minute videos is required to come from different program offerings, as well as from three distinct staff members. Each video is carefully reviewed and scored by an Excel master coach.

In scoring the videos, coaches use eight distinct components within each of the eight key elements, scoring a total of 64 components. Master coaches also take observational notes and record feedback during this time. The coach then provides virtual feedback and guidance to each individual who provided the videos, with a summary report about the overall program provided to the program administrator.

In this way, the Excel Initiative scores and provides feedback for the overall program, rather than for individual staff members. This program is designed to improve program quality and thus is not designed as a way to evaluate employees. The coach also works directly with the program director to implement a program improvement plan. During this time, professional development modules (from the Military Research and Outreach website) are offered in areas of needed growth, and coaches can develop goals and objectives for program improvement.

Unique Features

In contrast to other assessment tools, the Excel Initiative uses the YDOT, which is specifically designed to assess the relationships between adults and young people who participate in after-school programs. Feedback is provided on the program level rather than the individual level, addressing skill areas of strength and areas of development that are based on research-supported features of youth programs (e.g., Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

Another unique feature of the YDOT tool pertains to it being available online to programs across the world. Users interact with the program through a secure online platform, providing numerous advantages. This virtual platform:

- Eliminates the need for face-to-face contact
- Eliminates the time and cost of coach/evaluator travel
- Affords significant cost savings to programs looking for coaching
- Provides easy, convenient access to all programs in both urban and in remote areas
- Allows for unobtrusive assessment of worker-youth interactions because program participants are not faced with an unknown observer

Importantly, the YDOT assessment tool is integrated into a broader network of resources. The online platform includes an on-line interactive course for each topic addressed in the assessment; thus, child care professionals who wish to enhance their skills in a certain domain can easily access focused training to increase their effectiveness.

Positive outcomes are only seen when youth program services are of high quality. The Excel initiative conducts youth program evaluation; providing feedback, coaching, and training to increase the quality of youth program delivery in an innovative and cost-effective manner.