

# **Project Opportunity: A Youth Education and Trail Building Program**

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*Abstract:* In 1993, the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA), National Trails Fund Act (NRTFA), Georgia Cooperative Extension Service (Georgia 4-H), Georgia Department of Natural Resource (DNR), Georgia Wildlife Resources Division (WRD), and United States Forest Service (USFS) combined forces to provide jobs for youth and maintain Georgia's recreational trail structure. Project Opportunity (PO) was designed to provide 14- and 21-year-old youth with much needed jobs. PO also provided youth with on-the-job training, job-seeking skills, knowledge about the environment, and remedial programs in mathematics and reading. PO had a positive impact on participants in terms of knowledge, attitude, and skill development, and 105 km of trails were maintained and augmented. Although PO was designed as a pilot program for youth in the North Georgia area, it can easily be modified to address the specific needs of groups in other areas of the United States.

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Despite an extensive public commitment to help the poor over the last 30 years, 1 in 7 Americans live in poverty (Natl. Issues Forum 1993). The poverty rate hit 14.2% in 1991, a 30-year high (Garland 1992). Sixty percent of the people within the legal definition of poverty level are unemployed (National Issues Forum 1993). In 1992, the unemployment rate was 7.8 percent (Barnet 1993). For teenagers 16 to 19 years of age the unemployment rate was 18.6% (Johnson 1993).

Shortly after his inauguration in 1993, President Clinton introduced a job creation proposal to "rebuild" America which included \$170 million for summer jobs for teenagers and another \$50 million to expand a training program for people under 30 (Barnet 1993). Project Opportunity (PO) in North Georgia was a pilot program introduced in the summer of 1993 providing young people, ages 14-21, with summer employment; however, this program provided much more

than employment opportunities. PO taught a work ethic, an outdoor/environmental ethic, and encouraged the participants to remain in school and set higher goals for their future through remedial success.

The Motorcycle Industry Council (MIC) originated the idea for PO and thus was a major promoter and organizer for funding. The program was designed following the New Hampshire Second Start Program (Harstedt 1992) and planning began in October 1992. The PO model was unique in that it combined commitment and contributions from several different sources to offer a combination of on-the-job training and remedial education. These sources included the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA), National Trails Fund Act (NRTFA), Georgia Cooperative Extension Service (Georgia 4-H), Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR), Georgia Wildlife Resources Division (WRD), and United States Forest Service (USFS). Four primary goals were established: to maintain and augment the infrastructure of recreational trails, to provide employment opportunities for youth, to provide youth with life-skills training that help them develop a plan for their future, and to provide program activities for participants that will enhance their self-esteem. Educational goals were also included to teach program participants employment skills such as application completion skills, interview skills, communication skills, general job seeking skills, and basic reading and mathematical academic skills.

Young people were employed to maintain and build recreational trails for hiking, bicycling, horseback riding, education, and four-wheeling. The DNR and USFS had over 482 km (300 miles) of trail that needed work and attention. By combining the needs and efforts of the DNR and USFS with the needs of North Georgia youth, 2 problems were attacked at the same time. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the program, its goals, and implementation as it relates to the building and maintenance of trails on DNR and USFS lands.

Many people contributed their time, money, and efforts to make PO a success. The authors would like to thank John English of the MIC and Wayne Reece of Reece and Associates for conceiving the idea of PO and for working to help it become a reality.

## **Program Development**

In June 1993, the PO "pilot" program was implemented involving 14- to 21-year-old youth from a total of 12 counties in North Georgia. The youth were recruited by JTPA, a government program that places at-risk youth into summer programs offered by schools. JTPA agreed to recruit and place a total of 68 participants in the program. Under JTPA guidelines, a participant was eligible for the program if he or she was 14 to 21 years of age and from a family that received some form of federal assistance. A JTPA participant is a potential drop-out, has excessive absences in school, has failed 1 or more classes, or is 2 or more grade levels below the norm in reading and/or mathematics. PO participants were divided into groups, depending on their area of residence.

PO began on 16 June 1993 and ended 6 August 1993. Fifty-seven young men and women participated in the program. The youth worked Monday through Friday, approximately 32 hours a week, including an education day, and received minimum wage.

PO was operated by a director, coordinator, education coordinator, 3 team leaders, and 15 staff supervisors. Staff were expected to have previous experience with children, knowledge of outdoor and wildlife education, and leadership abilities. Staff members attended training courses in trail building, chainsaw safety procedures, all terrain vehicle (ATV) operation, First Aid/CPR, AIDS awareness, and dealing with at risk youth.

PO team leaders and supervisors lived in WRD check stations in 5 locations across North Georgia. Two supervisors and 12 participants were assigned to a work-site location. One team leader monitored 2 work site locations. Work-site locations and trails were assigned according to area. Each work site location was independent of the others.

The 3 administrative positions—the director, program coordinator, and the education director—were responsible for the development, organization, and implementation of the program. The director served as the main contact between state agencies, private donors, volunteers, and staff. Other responsibilities included funding, equipment purchasing, training, scheduling, staffing, and securing transportation and housing. The program coordinator was responsible for staff and youth recruitment, development and planning of staff training and youth conferences, accounts, and office management. The education coordinator planned and taught all outdoor and wildlife education courses, administered standardized testing, evaluated supervisors and youth, developed testing based on outdoor and wildlife education curriculum, and evaluated all scores.

The team leaders managed 4 supervisors and functioned as the liaison between the administrative staff and trail crews. Their work duties included working with USFS and DNR personnel to determine trail needs and maintenance, working with the education coordinator on classroom sites and curriculum, transporting needed materials and equipment to their respective sites, and collecting and delivering time cards to JTPA.

Supervisors instructed the participants on a daily basis and worked alongside them on the trail. Supervisors were responsible for safety, transportation, training, motivation, guidance, and daily programming, and assisting the education director.

Prior to the beginning of the summer, agency staff were requested to complete trail surveys and identify all work needed. PO workers would meet with agency staff at the trail site for a briefing on work to be accomplished. Ideally, agency staff remained with the PO workers to serve as trail foreman. Occasionally, PO staff were briefed at an office, briefed by phone or briefed by agency personnel who then left the site. In these cases time was wasted tracking down agency staff and waiting on them to arrive back at the site if a problem arose.

Participants built new trails and/or maintained existing trails 4 days a week.

Team building skills, safe work habits, and skills that establish a positive work ethic were incorporated into the daily work schedule of the participant. Outdoor and wildlife education was also interwoven into the work day as opportunities arose. However, the bulk of the outdoor and wildlife education information, as well as the remedial reading and mathematics skills, were taught in a 1 day per week time slot. This education day was included in the participants' paid work week. The participants received 75–90 hours of remedial education during the program. The remedial education was scheduled into 5 segments—the educational component, First Aid training, ATV training, the camping experience, and the college week experience. The lesson structure came from Project WILD (West Region Environ. Educ. Counc. 1983) and the materials developed by the education director.

JTPA personnel state that student academic levels tend to drop over the course of the summer (M. Hopkins, pers. commun.). The main educational goal of JTPA was to offer remedial mathematics and reading skills in a summer program to maintain the participant competency level. Therefore, the remedial programs were included in the summer work programs to achieve this goal.

Each of the 57 participants involved with PO received 3 pre-tests and post-tests for evaluation purposes. The tests included the Wide Range Achievement Test, the Jobs Corps Reading Screening Test, and the knowledge content exam (designed by the education director). Forty-one of 57 participants took the post-tests on the last day of employment, resulting in 41 matched pairs in the analysis.

JTPA and NRTFA were the 2 funding sources of the program. JTPA primarily funded the workers salaries and NRTFA funded the trails related materials. DNR, serving as administrator of the NRTFA money, provided funding for materials and training for trail maintenance and construction.

Georgia 4-H served as management for PO; including overall operation of the project, employment of staff, and contribution of much of the technical expertise. They also provided the vans used in the program.

WRD contributed the director position, trucks for hauling tools and materials, and housing for staff members. The Honda Motor Corporation, a member of the MIC, donated 15 ATVs to the program, including training and safety equipment. Additional non-monetary resources provided were school classrooms, central office space, an administrative secretary, environmental education materials, computer access, and copy machine access.

## Evaluation

The program was evaluated by staff, participants, and USFS employees in September 1993. Information gathered from the educational pre- and post-tests and personal interviews were also used in evaluating the program. As a result of the information accumulated, the "PO Pilot Program Evaluation" was prepared and a modified implementation guide was designed in 1994. The evalua-

tion indicates that many of the goals set by the program were successfully achieved.

PO estimated that 322 km (200 miles) of trail work could be completed in 1993. The original estimate of work to be completed was based on the assumption that 57 participants working a total of 37 days should be capable of completing 152 m (500 feet) of trail per day. The comprehensive nature of the work to be done on some of the trails was not taken into consideration prior to setting the 1993 goals. The actual amount of work completed was 105 km (65.5 miles).

The average length of trail completed by each group was approximately 21 km (13 miles), with the exception of the Rabun group which completed only 2.4 km (1.5 miles). The Rabun group, with the fewest number of participants (6), was assigned the most extensive project of the summer, the Moccasin Creek Project. In comparing distance actually completed by the participants to the original estimate of trail to be completed, the goal for 1993 was not achieved. However, the feedback from the USFS and DNR was quite positive.

Nick Nicholson from WRD stated, "the Oconee Wildlife Management Area's Interpretive Trail would never have gotten this much completed without the help of PO. We are now ahead of schedule due to the work this program has done." When judging the amount of work successfully completed, Nicholson's statement is significant. The USFS and DNR would have gotten only a fraction of the 105 km (65.5 miles) of trail completed without the additional help provided by PO. Therefore, 105 km of completed trails in Georgia should be deemed as a success.

The U.S. Department of Labor Summer Youth Employment Programs aspire to maintain academic levels in mathematics and reading. PO projected that 75% of the participants would maintain or improve in their academic skills. The results of the pre-test and post-test evaluations indicate that 34% of the participants maintained their academic levels and 42% of the participants improved their academic levels in mathematics. For reading, 22% maintained and 58% improved their skill level. These figures demonstrate the success of the program.

Another goal of PO was to set up an environment in which the participants would learn a positive attitude toward work and working with others. A Lykert-type scale to determine attitude change indicated participant's attitudes toward work and working with others was quite positive. When asked the following question, "Overall I think this was a great job," 100% of the participants agreed. These results are an unexpected surprise considering this job was assigned to the participants, rather than a choice they made, and considering they often worked in temperatures in excess of 34 C (100 F).

Little doubt exists about the impact of this program on the lives of the participants. After swinging a sling blade in 34 C (100 F) for 2 straight weeks, participants still looked forward to the next sweaty, dusty day. If asked why they liked the job, participants would enthusiastically comment that the work they were doing for the environment and the things they were learning made them "feel good."

Finally, PO attempted to teach an outdoor/environmental ethic. Outdoor and wildlife questions were included in the knowledge content pre-test and post-test and through personal interviews. The pre-test percentages indicate a positive outdoor/environmental attitude existed at the start of the program. One does not expect to see much change on the post-test when the pre-test percentages are high, as they are in this case. However, improvements in environmental attitudes were revealed in the post-test results.

The total cost of the program was \$256,694. JTPA provided \$157,088 for participant salaries, personnel costs and educational costs, while NRTFA provided \$99,606 for trail maintenance costs. These costs do not reflect in-kind contributions by WRD and Georgia 4-H. These costs appear to be high. However, PO was 3 programs combined: a jobs program for summer youth, an education program, and a trail building program. By combining agency resources, the costs of achieving individual agency goals were decreased.

To conduct an actual cost-benefit analysis of the program, evaluation data would have to be collected over a much longer time period (5–10 years) rather than the few weeks employed in this evaluation. If the program aided participants in their capabilities to get a job, their ability to get along with others on the job, and their attitudes about themselves, then the benefits would be great. As Dr. Doug Gatchell of Georgia 4-H stated, "If this program only helped 1 person to build their self-esteem and/or break out of the poverty chain, the program was well worth it."

### **Program Recommendations**

It is apparent that the program made a positive impact on a large percentage of the participants. As expected with pilot programs, areas of improvement were revealed.

In the future, the resources and constraints of PO will depend on the available funding. Ideally, several funding sources should be available to expand the resources of the program. While multiple funding sources have advantages, they can also add to the list of constraints, due to the fact that each funding source has its own set of rules and system of administration. The advantages and disadvantages of funding sources should be carefully examined when deciding which are compatible with the program.

Adequate program planning and preparation time should be provided for organizing, recruiting, and implementing a program of this size and scope. A full-time program coordinator, education coordinator, and administrative secretary would be required for the development, organization, and implementation of the program and assuring that tasks are completed on schedule.

Three staff supervisors for each work group (rather than 2) should be hired to provide the participants with necessary training and assistance. Each of the 3 supervisors would serve a distinct function. One supervisor would be trained in outdoor and wildlife education to focus on the educational needs of the program, 1 trained in social work to focus on the conflict management skills and

special needs of the participants, and 1 trained in management/office skills to handle the administrative needs (documentation, time cards, etc.) of the group.

The management/office skills supervisor should serve as team leader. The team leader should be responsible for meeting the demands of the various agencies and should handle all documentation. Therefore, access to an office with a copy machine, fax machine, and filing system should be provided for each team leader.

Trails to be maintained should be identified and flagged prior to the start of the program. Agency staff should meet with workers at the trail site and remain on location with the trail crew. This will minimize wasted time if problems arise.

Communication between staff and administration was a problem with the 1993 program. Communication problems arose due to the remote and isolated housing provided. Several modifications can be executed to enhance adequate housing facilities. Staff housing should be within 15 minutes of pick-up points and equipped with telephones or another type of communication device.

Staff training should be expanded from 1 week to 2 weeks. Staff training should include trail building instruction, chainsaw safety, and First Aid as did the pilot. In addition, outdoor and wildlife education classes, team building, conflict and management, and problem solving skills should be included.

A school recruitment program should be established giving the participant the option of working with this program, rather than assigning them to the program. Establishing a school recruitment program and word of mouth from the positive image the program created in 1993 should help in recruiting interested, new participants in the future.

Trail sites should be established close to pick-up points. In the 1993 program, participants often had 1-hour travel time to and from the work site. Since participants were paid for travel time (as per JTPA regulations), a shorter travel span should ensure more performance.

PO scheduled 3 classes on the education day which proved to be too intense. In the future, classes should be limited to 2 per day for 2 hours each, allowing more time for remedial training and individualized attention. Education materials should also be prepared for several academic reading levels. The 1993 pilot prepared materials on a 6th grade level for all participants, which is too easy for some and too difficult for others. Providing materials on 3 different levels should create a more individualized program.

The college week experience was an excellent event for the participants. Outside instructors were used for classes taught in wildlife, fisheries, astronomy, stream ecology, forest ecology, and job seeking skills. These outside instructors should be briefed on what the participants were taught throughout the summer, thus avoiding duplication in instruction.

The college week experience requires a great deal of time and effort to produce. A job fair program would be an excellent addition. However, this additional event will require the recruitment of volunteers and organizations to direct and implement.

An evaluation specialist should be involved with the program, beginning with the planning stage. An evaluation is necessary to provide information on the effectiveness of the program, to ensure that needs were met, to evaluate weakness of the program so that modifications can be made, and to supply funding agencies with documentation that their goals were satisfied.

## **Conclusion**

At the start of the program, the care and maintenance of Georgia's trail infrastructure was a "constant and difficult battle" (Jones 1993). Many of Georgia's, as well as the nation's, existing trails are suffering from lack of adequate maintenance (Jones 1993). PO is viewed as a chance to "deal with the environmental problems we face, while at the same time provide young people with meaningful employment and a chance to make a difference" (Jones 1993). PO was successful in fulfilling this need in 1993, and can continue to do so in the future.

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