

the 4-H agent's job: another look

Donald H. Goering

As a professional Extension 4-H and youth agent, what do you consider the critical components of your position? Do the many volunteers and agents with whom you interact agree with you and understand those critical components of your position? Are you giving priority and emphasis to the critical components of your position?

Iowa Study

That series of questions formed the foundation for an in-depth study of the tasks and duties performed by the Extension 4-H and youth agents employed by the Iowa Cooperative Extension Service. Over the years, several other states have conducted studies looking at the role of Extension youth agents.¹ Previously, there hadn't been an in-depth role analysis conducted in Iowa.

The identification of the critical components of the job should provide food for thought for the seasoned, experienced youth agent and thoughtful guidance to newly employed 4-H and youth agents,

This Iowa study was done to identify the critical duties and tasks to be performed to successfully conduct an Extension 4-H and youth program. It should be noted that this study was conducted as a companion to an ECOP Task Force sponsored national study on performance appraisal.² Iowa was one of the eight participating states in the nationwide study conducted on the roles of county staff members.

Hiring Requirements

The Iowa Extension Service differs in its hiring requirements from many other states in that it doesn't require a degree in

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agriculture or home economics to be employed as an Extension 4-H and youth agent. The preferred academic training for 4-H positions is in the disciplines that emphasize human development. This difference in degree requirements suggests there are different job expectations of the Iowa Extension 4-H and youth agent.

Compared Perceptions The Iowa Study compared the perceptions of the role of the Extension 4-H and youth agents by 5 separate groups who have an ongoing, continuing relationship with the Extension 4-H and youth agent. The five groups included in the study were:

1. The Extension 4-H and youth agents.
2. The area Extension directors, combined with state 4-H staff. This group serves as program and personnel supervisors for the 4-H agents.
3. Members of county Extension councils. This group is the governing body of each county Extension Service in Iowa.
4. Members of the county 4-H Expansion Review Committees. This group is the policy determination body for the county 4-H program.
5. Organizational leaders of the 4-H Clubs.

Sample A stratified random sample of 8 each of council members, 4-H committee members, and 4-H Club organizational leaders was selected from each of 20 randomly selected counties across Iowa.

Questionnaire The 5 groups responded to a questionnaire that called for a 3-part evaluation of 14 broad duties that might be included in the Extension 4-H and youth agent role. These 14 duties were determined from a job analysis conducted as a part of the national study. In addition, the professional staff groups conducted an additional 3-part evaluation on 125 specific tasks that Extension 4-H and youth agents might perform as part of the 14 duty areas. The usable questionnaire return response rate was 69.9% from the volunteers and 96.8% from the agents.

Findings Using a set of predetermined criteria, the agents and volunteers identified a set of duty areas they considered critical to the successful accomplishment of the 4-H position. In addition, the agents identified specific tasks associated with the duty areas they considered critical to the position.

**Critical Duty
Areas**

The identified critical duty areas on which there was general agreement among the several groups are identified below. These duty areas are listed in priority order, with the most critical listed first. For each duty area, a set of tasks was identified as important to that duty area:

1. Recruit, train, and utilize lay leaders.

Associated tasks (not in rank order):

- a. Determine type and number of lay leaders needed.
- b. Develop job descriptions for volunteer leaders.
- c. Consult advisory committee members or other key people in the community for nominations and help in recruiting leaders.
- d. Discuss with potential leaders what's expected of them and how they can contribute.
- e. Obtain commitment from leaders about time and resources they'll provide.
- f. Identify or help leaders identify training needs.
- g. Plan and conduct training sessions.
- h. Assign program responsibilities to lay leaders.
- i. Provide continuing support, training, and guidance to lay leaders.
- k. Evaluate impact of lay leader program accomplishments.

2. Conduct programs.

Associated tasks:

- a. Conduct educational programs.
- b. Lead discussions.
- c. Evaluate programs.

3. Prepare specific program plans.

Associated tasks:

- a. Determine objectives and audience for program.
- b. Review available material and get additional materials if needed.
- c. Consult advisory committee and other community leaders in preparing specific program plans.
- d. Determine most effective learning strategies and experiences for subject and specific audiences.
- e. Prepare educational program units including demonstrations, lectures, discussion guides, and evaluation instruments.
- f. Plan for personnel, facilities, equipment, and publicity.
- g. Communicate and coordinate plans with other staff.

4. Respond to client requests for specific information.

(No tasks).

5. Prepare annual plan of work.

Associated tasks:

- a. Review, up-date, or prepare long-range plan.
- b. Select program topics.
- c. Consult advisory committee and other community leaders in preparation and review of plan of action.
- d. Consult volunteers about plans, time commitments, and resources.
- e. Coordinate plans with other local staff and supporting staff.

6. Develop and maintain public relations.

Associated tasks:

- a. Identify individuals and groups whose support is important to Extension.
- b. Develop and maintain working relationships and rapport with key individuals.
- c. Develop and maintain working relationships and rapport with mass media.

7. Assess community needs.

Associated tasks:

- a. Recruit, select, and organize advisory committee members.
- b. Consult advisory committee and other community leaders in the assessment of community needs.

*Noncritical Duty
Areas*

In a similar way, this study identified tasks that the two professional groups did *not* consider critical to the successful accomplishment of the 4-H and youth agent. Included in this set are the following tasks and the associated duty areas:

1. Assess community needs.

Associated tasks:

- a. Review demographic data about community.

2. Prepare annual plan of work.

Associated tasks:

- a. Review prior narrative and statistical reports.
- b. Allocate person-days in each area.

3. Conduct programs.

Associated tasks:

- a. Obtain insurance coverage for groups and clubs if necessary.

4. Respond to client requests for specific information.

Associated tasks:

- a. Keep records of requests and information given.

5. Respond to client requests for technical assistance.

Associated tasks:

- a. Visit location/client if necessary.
- b. Facilitate communication between client and specialist.
- c. Demonstrate procedures if necessary.
- d. Keep records of requests and help given.

6. Report activities, impact, and accomplishments.

Associated tasks:

- a. Report statistical data on EMIS according to codes. This task met the criteria for inclusion in this group of de-emphasized tasks. However, it must be recognized that there's an administrative need to keep this as an appropriate task in the role of the Extension 4-H and youth agent.

7. Perform administrative functions.

Associated tasks:

- a. See that office equipment is maintained.
- b. Set up/maintain filing system.
- c. Serve on office committees.

It's evident from the above listing that administrative and organization chores aren't seen as particularly critical components of the 4-H agent's role.

Conclusions

The results of this study suggest that there's a need for the 4-H and youth agents to emphasize the educational leadership tasks of their positions. In addition, professional youth workers must continually guard against becoming a service-oriented youth worker. By combining the results of this study with the several other role studies, and with the proper use of the 4-H program assistants now available in many counties, 4-H and youth agents have the opportunity to look at their position, asking: "Am I doing the most critical components of my position?"³

The identification of the critical components of the job should provide food for thought for the seasoned, experienced youth agent and thoughtful guidance to newly employed 4-H and youth agents, as they strive to succeed in their positions.

- Footnotes**
1. Loren F. Goyen, "Youth Agent's Job: Critical Components," *Journal of Extension*, IX (Summer, 1971), 16-23; Charles W. Lifer, "The Role of the Area Extension Agent, 4-H as Perceived by County 4-H Advisory Committees" (Master's thesis, The Ohio State University, Columbus, 1966); and G. C. Whaples, *Major Duties and Responsibilities of the County Club Agent in Kansas* (Manhattan: Kansas State University, University Extension Education Department, 1965).
 2. Gary B. Brumback, Clifford P. Hahn, and Dorothy S. Edwards. *Reaching and Teaching People: A Nationwide Job Analysis of County Extension Agents' Work* (Washington, D.C.: American Institutes for Research, 1978).
 3. Jerry Parsons and John Kiesow, "The 4-H Program Assistant's Role," *Journal of Extension*, XIII (July/August, 1975), 11-18.

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