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Factors Affecting Teen Involvement in Pennsylvania 4-H Programming

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Abstract: The study reported here determined the factors that affect teen involvement in 4-H programming. The design of the study was descriptive and correlational in nature. Using a purposive sampling procedure, a survey questionnaire was distributed to all (N=214) 4-H members attending the 4-H State Leadership Conference. The major findings of the study aligned of previous research and showed that parents have a great influence on their children's choices within 4-H. Additionally, the results of the study show that the 4-H members are experiencing the opportunity to lead meetings and organize events.

Introduction and Theoretical Framework

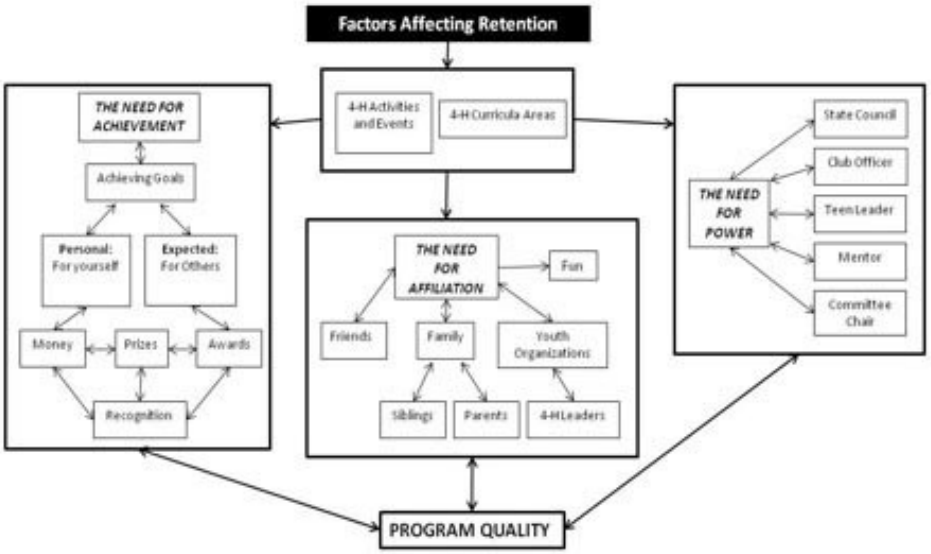
Throughout history, community programs such as 4-H, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, the Boys and Girls Clubs of America, and the YMCA have promoted youth development by providing a safe environment where young people of all ages can explore personal interests and develop peer groups that share those same interests (Anderson-Butcher, Newsome, & Ferrari, 2003; Cano & Bankston, 1992; Ferrari & Turner, 2006; Lauver & Little 2005; Weber & McCullers, 1986; Weiss, Little, & Bouffard; 2005; Wingenbach, Nestor, Lawrence, Gartin, Woloshuk, & Mulkeen, 2000). Dworkin, Larson, and Hansen (2003, p. 25) reported that "youth activities such as sports, arts groups, and organizations" provide learning opportunities that encourage members to be "agents of their own development." The learning opportunities (i.e., goal setting workshops,

structured planned practices, teamwork activities, leadership roles) require members to improve time management skills, conduct business with adults, and improve their public speaking, confidence, and teamwork skills (Dworkin et al., 2003).

Research has advocated that recruitment and retention programs geared towards teenagers are needed in 4-H and other youth community programs (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2003; Ferrari & Turner, 2006; Huebner & Mancini, 2003; Lauver, Little, & Weiss, 2004; Lock & Costello, 2001). Teens can serve as an important source for youth education by providing a valuable educational experience for younger members (Ponzio, Junge, Smith, Manglallan, & Peterson, 2000). Thus, retaining teenage 4-H members strengthens the older members' skills, while enhancing the learning experiences of the younger 4-H members and reducing the workload of adult volunteers (Cantrell, Heinsohn, & Doebler, 1989).

Studies have shown that teenage 4-H member retention lies within the context of the program offerings (Lauver & Little, 2005; Ritchie & Resler, 1993). If 4-H programs appear to be of low quality and do not meet the needs of teens, then teens will look elsewhere to fulfill those needs (Acosta & Holt, 1991; Ferrari & Turner, 2006; Harder, Lamm, Lamm, Rose, & Rask, 2005; Lauver & Little; Radhakrishna, Leite, & Hoy, 2003; Ritchie & Resler). A conceptual framework based on McClelland's motivational needs theory (McClelland, 1987), links the opportunities available to 4-H members to factors affecting member retention (Figure 1).

Figure 1.
Conceptual Frame work of Factors Affecting Retention, Based on McLelland's Motivational Needs Theory



McClelland's (1987) theory consists of three motivational factors: *a need for achievement, a need for affiliation, and a need for power*. According to the conceptual framework, the need for achievement can be met through the projects that members complete and the goals that they reach. The completion of projects and goals are recognized in various forms within 4-H; money, prizes, or awards. The need for affiliation can be met through the relationships made with friends, parents, siblings, and 4-H leaders. By joining 4-H, youth have the opportunity to associate with a group of individuals with similar interests. As cited in Dworkin et al. (2003, p. 18), Brown (1990) stated that, "When a teen joins a team, club, or activity group, other members often become part of that teen's peer friendship network." Leadership roles, offered in Pennsylvania, such as serving as a committee chair, mentoring a younger 4-H member, serving as a teen leader, serving as a club

officer, or being a member of the state 4-H council are offered to 4-H members and assist in meeting the need for power and assists these members in developing and/or refining communication skills (Pennsylvania 4-H, n.d.).

According to Acosta and Holt (1991, p. 4), "designing programs to meet 'felt needs' of clientele is definitely the key to maintaining involvement." Additionally, overall program quality plays a key role in motivating members to remain involved in youth community programs (Acosta & Holt; Ferrari & Turner, 2006; Harder et al., 2005; Lauver & Little, 2005; Radhakrishna et al., 2003; Ritchie & Resler, 1993). Motivation differs from one individual to another (Brennan, Barnett, & Baugh, 2007), thus providing 4-H members with age-appropriate activities that stimulate their mind and present them with challenges, will entice 4-H members to remain involved.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of the study reported here was to examine factors that affect Pennsylvania 4-H member (ages 13-18) involvement in 4-H programming. To serve as a foundation for future retention initiatives, 4-H Extension educators and adult volunteers need to know the factors that affect older 4-H members' choices to remain engaged and whether retention factors differ across project curriculum areas. To that end, the following objectives were established:

1. Identify and describe the factors related to joining and retention of 13-18 year old Pennsylvania 4-H members.

2. Determine the factors affecting participation in 4-H activities, events, and projects of 13-18 years old Pennsylvania 4-H members.

Methods and Procedures

Data for this study were collected through a researcher-developed questionnaire. The questionnaire contained Likert-type and multiple-choice questions that were developed to determine factors affecting 4-H involvement of the target population.

The questions were derived from previous literature and personal communication with state 4-H staff. Five panelists with expertise in various areas of youth development and instrument development reviewed the questionnaire to establish face and content validity. The questionnaire was divided into four sections: (1) why members joined 4-H, (2) 4-H involvement, (3) limits of 4-H involvement, and (4) member demographics. The questionnaire was pilot tested at two 4-H community club meetings where 4-H members (N = 22) completed the questionnaire to establish reliability (= .76). Through collaboration with the Pennsylvania 4-H staff, the questionnaire was distributed to all 4-H members (N = 214) who attended the 2008 State 4-H Leadership Conference.

The design of the study was descriptive and correlational (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002) in nature. A 40% response rate was achieved (N = 87) with an established reliability of = .76. No generalizations were made, and the study is applicable to only the 4-H members who attended the 2008 State Leadership Conference and chose to participate in the study. Research data were entered and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences version 16.0 (SPSS 16.0). The researcher used descriptive statistics to discuss the research objectives.

Results

The joining/retention factors section in the questionnaire identified the reasons why 4-H members joined and remain involved in 4-H. When asked to rate the level of importance of the reasons they joined 4-H, on a scale of 1 = least important to 7 = most important, 4-H members selected the following factors as the top five reasons for joining: *because I was interested in the projects offered* (M = 5.68; SD = 1.25), *because it [4-H] looked like a fun organization* (M = 5.61; SD = 1.44), *because I wanted to work with animals* (M = 5.50; SD = 2.05), *to develop leadership skills* (M = 5.16; SD = 1.65), and *to become a leader* (M = 4.90; SD = 1.80). The least important reason that youth joined 4-H was *to make money* (M = 3.01; SD = 2.27). However, all means were above 3.00, indicating that all factors influenced the decision to participate.

As shown in Figure 1, human influence assists in satisfying the need for affiliation. When analyzing the results of the study, the researcher found that parents have the greatest influence on a 4-H member's enrollment and participation. Of the 83 members who indicated parents as an influence, 52 (62.7%) stated that their parents *greatly influenced* them to join 4-H. When analyzing the results of the 4-H leaders' influence on a youth's choice to join 4-H, 44 members stated that 4-H leaders *greatly influenced* or *influenced* their decision to join 4-H. The analysis of the data also indicated that siblings have the least amount (N = 39, 49.4%) of influence on 4-H members' decisions to join.

The need for power can be satisfied through the leadership opportunities that 4-H offers youth (Figure 1). The 4-H members at the 2008 State 4-H Leadership Conference were asked how often they experienced challenging tasks and were given certain responsibilities. The researcher found that the majority of the members experienced challenges and responsibilities "*often* or *very often"* within their respective 4-H clubs (Table 1). Five challenging tasks and responsibilities were reported to be experienced by every participant in the study; *completing challenging tasks* (M = 3.55, SD = .87), *making important decisions* (M = 3.87, SD = .86), *developing your own skills* (M = 4.02, SD =. 93), *feeling like you are making a contribution* (M = 3.93, SD = .94), and *participating in community service projects* (M = 3.88, SD = .99) (Table 1). The challenging tasks or responsibilities that were experienced the least often were *participating in State 4-H Achievement Days* (M = 2.67, SD = 1.49) and *participating in regional 4-H events* (M = 3.13, SD = 1.23).

Table 1.
Challenging Tasks/Responsibilities Experienced by 4-H Members

Task/Responsibility	N	Never	Seldom	Periodically	Often	Very Often	Mean	SD
	Percentage							
Leading others	84	1.2	4.8	21.4	32.1	40.5	4.06	.96
Developing your own skills	84	0.0	8.3	16.7	39.3	35.7	4.02	.93
Participating in club events other than regular mtgs.	83	2.4	7.2	19.3	34.9	36.1	3.95	1.04
Feeling you were making a contribution	84	0.0	9.5	19.0	40.5	31.0	3.93	.94

Participating in community service projects	84	0.0	9.5	26.2	31.0	33.3	3.88	.99
Participating in a county 4-H event	84	3.6	9.5	26.2	16.7	44.0	3.88	1.19
Making important decisions	84	0.0	6.0	26.2	42.9	25.0	3.87	.86
Planning 4-H activities	84	1.2	13.1	28.6	28.6	28.6	3.70	1.06
Completing challenging tasks	84	0.0	11.9	34.5	40.5	13.1	3.55	.87
Giving a public speech	84	7.1	14.3	39.3	20.2	19.0	3.30	1.15
Attending a state 4-H leadership conference	84	9.5	23.8	26.2	23.8	16.7	3.14	1.23
Participating in a regional 4-H event	84	7.1	29.8	23.8	21.4	17.9	3.13	1.23
Participating in 4-H State Achievement Days	82	34.1	14.6	15.9	20.7	14.6	2.67	1.49

Based on seven (*animal science, N = 61; family and consumer science, N = 24; environmental education and earth science, N = 7; science and technology, N = 2; citizenship and civic education, N = 7; leadership and personal development, N = 19; and healthy lifestyles education, N = 8*) of the 10 4-H curriculum areas, members were asked to identify factors that affected their decision to choose the projects they were currently completing (Table 2). Factors that affected project selection were: *I wanted to work with animals, the project looked fun, my friends and siblings were involved, to make money, I liked the 4-H leaders, I was interested in the projects offered, and to improve my public speaking skills* (Table 2). Curriculum based activities assist in meeting the need for achievement as shown in Figure 1.

Table 2.
Factors Affecting Project Selection

4-H Curriculum Area Factor	**Factor**	**N**
Animal Science	I wanted to work with animals	48
Family and Consumer Sciences	The project looked fun	18
Environmental Education and Earth Science	My friends or siblings were involved	3
Science and Technology	To make money	2

Citizenship and Civic Education	I liked the 4-H leaders & I was interested in the projects offered	4
Leadership and Personal Development	To improve my public speaking skills	14
Healthy Lifestyles Education	I was interested in the projects offered	7

In addition to the factors that encourage involvement, there are also factors that discourage or limit involvement. Members were asked to rate the level of limitation, on a five-point scale of 1 = not a limitation to 5 = a major limitation, of factors affecting 4-H participation. Of the factors listed in the study, *the time required for participation* (M = 2.20, SD = 1.31) was the most limiting factor of 4-H participation (Table 3). This could be due to the fact that the participants of the study were involved in an average 3.36 activities outside of 4-H. The least limiting factor of participation was *my fear of being in front of a crowd* (M = 1.27, SD = .67) (Table 3).

Table 3.
Factors Limiting 4-H Participation

		Not a Limitation				**Major Limitation**		
Factions	**N**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**Mean**	**S.D.**
The time required for participation	82	43.9	19.5	15.9	14.6	6.1	2.20	1.31
The financial cost of participation	78	48.7	20.5	23.1	6.4	1.3	1.91	1.05
My parents	80	50.0	26.2	13.8	7.5	2.5	1.86	1.08
Availability of resources (land, barn, etc.)	80	61.2	18.8	3.8	11.2	5.0	1.80	1.24
My knowledge of the event/project	80	67.5	18.8	7.5	3.8	2.5	1.55	0.97
My 4-H leaders	80	80.0	7.5	7.5	3.8	1.2	1.39	0.88
Allergies	80	85.0	5.0	2.5	1.2	6.2	1.39	1.06
My county 4-H educator	79	86.1	6.3	1.3	5.1	1.3	1.29	0.83
A family member's allergies	80	86.2	5.0	5.0	1.2	2.5	1.29	0.83

My fear of being in front of a crowd	79	82.3	11.4	5.1	0.0	1.3	1.27	0.67

Implications and Recommendations

The findings of the study reported here aligned with previous research and indicated that parents had a large influence on a youth's choice to join 4-H (Hartley, 1983; Lock & Costello, 2001; Ritchie & Resler, 1993). Therefore, promotional materials geared towards parents should be created and disseminated throughout Pennsylvania. The promotional materials should highlight the life skill (i.e., record keeping, public speaking, time management, goal setting) building opportunities that are available through participation in the 4-H (Lauver & Little, 2005).

Participation choices of 4-H membership are influenced by their desire to improve life skills such as: public speaking, organizational skills, and leadership skills (Acosta & Holt, 1991; Lauver & Little, 2005; Radhakrishna, Sterner, Fabin & Everhart, 2004; Van Horn, Flanagan & Thomson, 1999). According to the results of the study, 4-H members chose projects and events based on the chance for improvement of their leadership and public speaking skills. The results achieved in the study mirror previous research which states that teenage youth desire activities that promote job skill building and professional skill building (Acosta & Holt; Lauver & Little; Radhakrishna et al., 2004; Van Horn et al., 1999). To that end, Extension educators and 4-H leaders should continue to design programs and activities that promote personal growth and life skill building. The life skills featured should be presented in a way that will show how the featured life skills will assist the 4-H member in becoming more marketable to potential employers in the future.

Members of 4-H who participated in the study were given the opportunity to challenge themselves and assist in facilitating their respective 4-H clubs. Previous research stated that teenage youth need to feel like an integral part of facilitating the program (Brennan et al., 2007; Larson, 2000; Lauver & Little, 2005). Because teens need to feel like an integral part of facilitating the organization, 4-H programmers and leaders need to continue to allow members to assist in running the programs and continually add new and exciting opportunities for planning, leading, and facilitating activities and events (Hensley, Place, Jordan & Israel, 2007). Further, recruitment/retention guides that outline methods of incorporating members in the decision-making processes within 4-H should be created and distributed to Pennsylvania 4-H Extension educators and local 4-H leaders to assist in recruiting and retaining teenage 4-H members. The guides should provide the resources (worksheets, pamphlets, activity/event descriptions, etc.) required for the Extension educators and 4-H leaders to thoroughly inform youth and parents of the benefits of 4-H membership.

Many 4-H members find it difficult to find the time to participate in everything that interests them because numerous opportunities are presented to youth as they age and transition from middle school to high school (Weiss et al., 2005). One way to compete with other activities is to ensure that all 4-H activities and events are age appropriate and present some level of challenge to the members. Leaders and Extension educators should extensively evaluate their 4-H programs and ensure that they are incorporating events/activities that are age appropriate and appealing to all ages of 4-H members.

A 4-H member's participation is influenced by different factors from one 4-H curriculum area to the next. Keeping the factors affecting participation in 4-H curriculum areas in mind, 4-H leaders and 4-H Extension educators cannot treat every community club and curriculum area the same. Varied interests within the clubs must be catered to for membership to remain strong or increase. According to previous research, 4-H programmers should take into consideration "what projects will appeal to and meet the needs of young

people we want to involve (Van Horn et al., 1999, p. 2)." Each curriculum area should develop age-appropriate activities/events that are geared towards the subject matter included in curriculum area.

Lack of sufficient information about 4-H activities limits 4-H members' participation. The allocation of more funds to produce informational materials focused on particular activities would allow 4-H members to be better informed about the happenings of 4-H beyond the club level. In addition to the informational materials, former attendees (Lauver & Little, 2005) of the activities/events should be used as advocates of the activities/events, traveling to 4-H club meetings and informing members of how they benefited through their attendance at the activity/event.

The cost of participating in 4-H events or activities limits some 4-H members' ability to be involved (Brennan et al., 2007). Offering more opportunities for 4-H members to earn/win registration fees for events would encourage not only participation in county, regional, and state events, but also would encourage increased participation in club activities. Extension educators and 4-H leaders should seek funding from outside sources (e.g., sectors of the agricultural industry), to assist in providing funding to help members pay registration fees for activities/events.

Limitations of the Study

The study was conducted in only one state and utilized a purposive sample as the population. Non-respondents were not compared to respondents therefore the results of the study are applicable to the participants of the study. Furthermore, the population was homogeneous in nature, and therefore no significant relationships were present.

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