# Extension's Role in Preparing Youth for the Workforce: A Challenge to Extension Professionals

**Graham R. Cochran**
Assistant Professor
Department of Human and Community Resource Development
The Ohio State University
Columbus, Ohio
cochran.99@osu.edu

**Kimberly Catchpole**
Extension Educator, 4-H Youth Development
Adventure Central
Dayton, Ohio
catchpole.2@osu.edu

**Nate Arnett**
Extension Educator, 4-H Youth Development
Adventure Central
Dayton, Ohio
arnett.67@osu.edu

**Theresa M. Ferrari**
Associate Professor and Extension Specialist
4-H Youth Development
Columbus, Ohio
ferrari.8@osu.edu

Ohio State University Extension

**Abstract:** During the first decade of the 21st century, much as been written about the knowledge economy, implications for work, and concerns about a widening gap between the skills employers need and the capabilities of employees. An intentional focus on workforce preparation will improve the impact of 4-H programming by more clearly demonstrating a return on investment to stakeholders, better preparing future leaders for the workforce and life, and helping fill a gap for employers. A call to action and five questions (e.g., "Why 21st century skills?") are presented with initial thought from the authors.

While Extension has been successfully developing youth into capable, competent, caring, contributing citizens through 4-H for over 100 years, it is becoming increasingly evident that the skills needed for success in the 21st century workforce are not the same skills needed 100 years ago. As a result of a transition into a knowledge-based society and economy, changing demographics, technology, and other forces, young people are entering a fast-paced and knowledge-intensive workplace and are facing systems, once stable and

predictable, that are now characteristically uncertain (Dubois, Rothwell, Stern, & Kemp, 2004; Duderstadt, 1999; Karakas, 2007).

In an increasingly competitive environment, U.S. employers are finding that new entrants into the workforce are ill prepared. Extension professionals should lead the way by demonstrating how youth development programs like 4-H can help close the skills gap.

# The Skills Gap and Skills for Success

In research publications and the popular press, the skills gap has been a prevalent topic. The message for professionals in youth development (Levy & Murnane, 2006), K-12 education (Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006), higher education (BHEF, 2003), and the business sector (ASTD, 2006) is the same: The nature of work has changed, and there is a widening gap between the skills employers need and the capabilities of employees, and the issue is very important to our future.

Organizations are looking for employees with skills for success in the knowledge economy, skills such as work ethic, teamwork, communication, and problem solving (see Cochran & Lekies, 2008 for a synthesis of these skills). Cochran & Ferrari (2009) summarized the need and role for youth development: "The time is right for youth programs to consider a more intentional role in supporting adolescents' workforce preparation" (p. 21). If the time is right, what do Extension professionals need to do to make it a reality?

# Call to Action: Extension's 4-H Program & Workforce Preparation

In order to prepare youth to not only compete, but to lead in the 21st century workforce, we believe Extension professionals must take a critical look at the way they have traditionally approached positive youth development and ask some tough questions. The skills necessary for success in a 21st century workforce correlate with those gleaned from positive youth development programs (Kazis & Kopp, 1997; Levin, 1994), and out of school time programs are recognized as an ideal place for development of workforce preparation skills (Cochran & Ferrari, 2009; Schwarz & Stolow, 2006).

Thus, it stands to reason that as a leader in the field of youth development, it would be a natural and logical fit for Extension to meet this need. However, Extension professionals cannot be satisfied to do this passively. The effort to prepare youth for success in the knowledge economy must be intentional and must begin now.

It is our view that an intentional focus on workforce preparation will improve the impact of Extension programming in the following ways: by more clearly demonstrating and communicating the return on investment to stakeholders, by better preparing our future leaders for the workforce and life, and by helping fill a vital gap for employers. If you are willing to accept this challenge, here are five questions Extension professionals must ask before getting started.

## 1. Why 21st Century Skills?

A 2008 report from Child Trends showed considerable overlap between research on skills described as important for healthy youth development, for college readiness, and for workforce readiness (Lippman, Atienza, Rivers, & Keith, 2008). Many of the same skills Extension professionals have called "life skills" (Barkman & Machtmes, 2000; Hendricks, 1996) are now described as "skills for success in the knowledge economy," "21st century skills," or "applied skills." If these 21st century skills are what employers are telling us they need and many correspond with what we are already doing in the field of positive youth development,

doesn't it make sense to speak the employer's language and intentionally target development of these skills? Extension professionals should become familiar with current research on the skills gap and what employers are saying they need.

## 2. How Can We Add Value Without Adding More "Stuff"?

As many Extension systems are facing budget constraints, the Extension professional is challenged to do more with less, so adding a new program may be out of the question. This does not have to be the case with workforce preparation. In fact, it may be a way to add value to existing programming.

For example, adding value may mean applying a workforce preparation lens to existing programming (e.g., adding structured interviews and performance evaluations for teen camp counselors could enhance the experience for participants and document the program's impact in terms of workforce skills). From another perspective, consider how Extension professionals might leverage relationships with youth, as well as knowledge of local communities and connection with local employers, to play a role in preparing employers who hire teens (Vogel, 2008) or helping to facilitate the placement and management of youth through work-based learning programs (e.g., Workforce Investment Act-sponsored programs).

Extension programs in Ohio have used simple, adaptable tools that put the focus on workforce preparation.

- The Job Experience and Training (JET) program in Dayton, Ohio incorporates intentional reflection into a work-based learning program through the use of a journal, performance appraisals, and self-assessments (Ferrari, Arnett, & Cochran, 2008).

- The Friend's Care Intergenerational Garden in Greene County, Ohio started as a community service project designed to teach gardening skills. Through the use of performance appraisals, self-assessments, and reflection opportunities, the program now provides an opportunity to focus on workforce preparation skills (Arnett, Lekies, & Bridgeman, 2008).

While these methods may have been successful for the programs mentioned, we recommend that Extension professionals assess the needs of their individual programs and communities and identify methods for programming and evaluation that meet their unique needs.

## 3. What Are the Specific Things that Would Institutionalize the Intentionality of 21st Century Skills in Extension Programming?

The good news is that Extension programming will not need a massive change effort to successfully integrate 21st century skills. As with any cultural shift, certain components will be necessary to navigate the change to include: identifying terminology and a model for programming; common evaluations, lesson plans, and learning sessions for older youth; and working with our volunteers to help them translate the 4-H experience into 21st century language. Ohio 4-H has defined terms, developed a model, and developed a workforce skills evaluation tool, which has served as a starting point for our organization (see Ohio State University Extension [2009] for more information).

## 4. How Do We Ensure that Youth Make the Connection?

Just because youth are learning life skills in youth development programs, it cannot be assumed that they are able to generalize this knowledge to skills needed in the workplace. We have noticed that youth who practiced

21st century skills, such as teamwork, social skills, and initiative, through a common 4-H experience (in this case camp counseling) were not always able to make the connection between the skills they were learning and the future applicability of these skills (Ferrari & McNeely, 2007). How then can we be successful in preparing youth for the workforce?

Extension professionals must intentionally build 21st century skills language into their programs and use tools and opportunities for focused reflection that will facilitate the generalizing process and application to the future. Encouraging youth to look at skills through a workforce preparation lens may help make a connection between what they are learning now and skills needed for the future, provide a level of urgency and motivation by making a real world connection, and foster opportunities to practice these skills in 4-H.

## 5. How Do We Make the Connection For Our Stakeholders? How Does Extension Demonstrate that Its Programming Really Does Return a Benefit?

Extension professionals look at the list of 21st century skills and typically exclaim, "We have always been doing this!" and usually these skills have been termed "life skills." However, talking about life skill development and even documenting impact on those skills may not be enough. In a recent *Journal of Extension* commentary, Lamm and Harder (2009) suggested that 4-H "has done an outstanding job of showing it is at the forefront of life skill development, but 4-H has not emphasized what makes it stand out" ("Impacts on Youth," para. 4). The challenge is: How does Extension document impact on workforce skills, and how do we serve as a model for other youth-serving agencies?

In order to receive the support and recognition required, we need to think differently about how we collect and report impacts on our key outcomes. Simply believing we are making a difference will not be enough. We agree with Lamm and Harder (2009), who stated "Extension's challenge is to prove 4-H's worth by demonstrating a clear return-on-investment to stakeholders" ("4-H in Modern America," para. 5). Documenting workforce preparation outcomes and connecting that impact data to employers' needs is one way that Extension professionals can demonstrate a return on investment. In times of economic challenge, it is not good enough to merely be a player in the game. Extension must lead the way!

# References

Arnett, N., Lekies, K., & Bridgeman, B. (2008). *2007 Sauder-funded work-based learning programs (Gardening Focus)*. Retrieved February 23, 2010, from: http://www.ohio4h.org/workforceprep/documents/SauderGardeningWBL2007_000.pdf

American Society for Training & Development. (2006). *Bridging the skills gap: How the skills shortage threatens growth and competitivenessâ ¦and what to do about it* [White paper]. Retrieved February 23, 2010, from: http://www.astd.org/NR/rdonlyres/FB4AF179-B0C4-4764-9271-17FAF86A8E23/0/BridgingtheSkillsGap.pdf

Barkman, S. J., & Machtmes, K. L. (2000). Measuring youth development programs: The four-fold youth development model. *CYD Journal, 1*(4), 40-47.

Business-Higher Education Forum. (2003). *Building a nation of learners: The need for changes in teaching and learning to meet global challenges.* Retrieved February 23, 2010, from: http://www.bhef.com/publications/documents/building_nation_03.pdf

Cochran, G. R., & Ferrari, T. M. (2009). Preparing youth for the 21st century knowledge economy: Youth programs and workforce preparation. *Afterschool Matters, 8*, 11-25. Retrieved February 23, 2010, from: http://www.robertbownefoundation.org/pdf_files/2009_asm_spring.pdf

Cochran, G., & Lekies, K. (2008). *Skills for success in the knowledge economy*. Retrieved February 23, 2010, from: http://www.ohio4h.org/workforceprep/documents/SkillsforSuccess-ActionBriefMay2008.pdf

Casner-Lotto, J., & Barrington, L. (2006). *Are they really ready to work? Employers' perspectives on the basic knowledge and applied skills of new entrants to the 21st century E.S. workforce.* New York: The Conference Board. Retrieved February 23, 2010, from: http://www.conference-board.org/pdf_free/BED-06-Workforce.pdf

Dubois, D. D., Rothwell, W. J., Stern, D. J., & Kemp, L. K. (2004). *Competency-based human resource management*. Palo Alto, CA: Davies-Black Publishing.

Duderstadt, J. J. (1999, Winter). New roles for the 21st-century university. *Issues Online in Science and Technology*. Retrieved February 23, 2010, from: http://www.issues.org/16.2/duderstadt.htm

Ferrari, T. M., Arnett, N., & Cochran, G. (2008). Preparing teens for success: Building 21st century skills through a 4-H work-based learning program. *Journal of Youth Development, 3*(1), Article 080301FA001. Retrieved February 23, 2010, from: http://www.nae4ha.com/periodicals.htm

Ferrari, T. M., & McNeely, N. N. (2007). Positive youth development: What's camp counseling got to do with it? Findings from a study of Ohio 4-H camp counselors. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 45(2) Article 2RIB7. Available at: http://www.joe.org/joe/2007april/rb7.php

Hendricks, P. A. (1996). *Developing youth curriculum using the Targeting Life Skills Model: Incorporating developmentally appropriate learning opportunities to assess impact and life skills development.* Ames, IA: Iowa State University Extension.

Karakas, F. (2007). The twenty-first century leader: Social artist, spiritual visionary, and cultural innovator. *Global Business and Organizational Excellence, 26*(3), 44-50. Retrieved February 23, 2010, from: http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/journal/114186560/abstract?CRETRY=1&SRETRY=0

Kazis, R., & Kopp, H. (1997). *Both sides now: New directions in promoting work and learning for disadvantaged youth.* Retrieved February 23, 2010, from: http://www.jff.org/publications/workforce/both-sides-now-new-directions-promoting-/170

Lamm, A. & Harder, A. (2009). 4-H going beyond life skill development. *Journal of Extension* [On-line]*, 47(4) Article 4COM1. Available at: http://www.joe.org/joe/2009august/comm1.php

Levin, H. M. (1994). Educational workplace needs. *Theory into Practice, 33*(2), 132-138.

Levy, F., & Murnane, R.J. (2006). Why the changing American economy calls for twenty-first century learning: Answers to educators' questions. *New Directions for Youth Development, 110,* 53-62.

Lippman, L., Atienza, A., Rivers, A., & Keith, J. (2008). *A developmental perspective on college and workplace readiness*. Retrieved February 23, 2010, from: http://www.childtrends.org/Files/Child_Trends-2008_09_15_FR_ReadinessReport.pdf

Ohio State University Extension. (2009). Ohio youth workforce preparation: Youth success [Website].

Retrieved February 23, 2010, from: http://youthsuccess.osu.edu/

Schwartz, E., & Stolow, D (2006). Twenty-first century learning in afterschool. *New Directions for Youth Development, 110, 81-99.*

Vogel, E. (2008). Employers can do youth development too. *Journal of Youth Development, 3*(2), Article 080302FA004. Retrieved February 23, 2010, from: http://www.nae4ha.com/periodicals.htm