

Parallel Volunteer Learning During Youth Programs

Marilyn K. Lesmeister

Assistant Professor and Oregon 4-H Volunteer Development & Civic Engagement Educator
Corvallis, Oregon

Marilyn.lesmeister@oregonstate.edu

Jeremy Green

Assistant Professor and 4-H Youth Educator, Crook County
Prineville, Oregon

Jeremy.green@oregonstate.edu

Amy Derby

Instructor and 4-H Youth Educator, Wheeler County
Fossil, Oregon

Amy.derby@oregonstate.edu

Candi Bothum

Instructor and 4-H Youth Educator, Deschutes County
Redmond, Oregon

Candi.bothum@oregonstate.edu

Oregon State University

Abstract: *Lack of time is a hindrance for volunteers to participate in educational opportunities, yet volunteer success in an organization is tied to the orientation and education they receive. Meeting diverse educational needs of volunteers can be a challenge for program managers. Scheduling a Volunteer Learning Track for chaperones that is parallel to a multi-day retreat for teens, addressed this need. Authors discuss the need for the learning track, implementation, evaluation, and program impact. Taking opportunities to meet adult educational needs during youth events can be an effective and efficient use of volunteer time at local and state levels.*

Lack of time is the greatest hindrance for volunteers to participate in educational opportunities related to their volunteer role (Arnold & Dolenc, 2008). Despite the time it takes, the education volunteers receive is important to their success in an organization (Arnold, Dolenc, & Rennekamp, 2009; Culp, Tichenor, Doyle, Steward, & Hunter, 2010; Cummins, 1998). Volunteers in 4-H may need to learn about planning, teaching, managing, marketing, evaluating, or advocating for, programs. They come to these roles with different levels of experience.

Addressing such a wide range of educational needs can be a challenge for volunteer program managers. A longitudinal study by Culp (2000) found that that "considerable amount of time and resources, on the part of both volunteer and paid staff, are dedicated annually to the planning, coordination, and execution of educational volunteer events" (p. 1). One state's response to this challenge is to offer an educational track for volunteers that parallels existing 4-H youth programming, therefore saving time and using resources effectively and efficiently.

A "parallel volunteer learning track" can be described as one or more volunteer development opportunities offered during the same time schedule, at or near the same facility, as an educational program for youth. This term was not found in volunteer development literature, nor was there evidence of research being conducted around this concept.

An Example of a Parallel Volunteer Learning Track

At the annual High Desert Leadership Retreat (HDLR), adult volunteers had facilitated independent living experiences with teens before and after leadership workshops each day, but adults had few responsibilities while teens attend workshops between 9:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. The planning committee recognized this opportunity to engage volunteers more fully by offering a parallel adult learning track.

The Volunteer Learning Track at HDLR addressed a variety of educational requests. Planners consolidated a list of needs from volunteer input and selected nine topics to offer during this multi-county program, including: adding pizzazz to 4-H meetings, infusing ethics education in competitive activities, appreciating individuals (True Colors), and discovering opportunities outside county borders.

During the first year, when the adult track was held in a building separate from the youth activities, five HDLR chaperones chose to stay engaged with youth participants instead of attending the Volunteer Track. During the second year, when adult and youth sessions were held in one building, all adult chaperones participated in Volunteer Learning Track sessions a majority of the time.

Adult volunteers at HDLR represented a wide range of experience in 4-H. Six volunteers had fewer than 5 years of experience, five had 6 to 9 years, and two had more than 10 years experience. Most had never attended an educational opportunity outside their counties.

Impact of the Parallel Volunteer Learning Track

As a result of attending the Parallel Learning Track, more than 80% of the participants reported they gained confidence in their ability to do 4-H volunteer work and received information that was helpful in their role. More than 70% better understood (a) positive youth development, (b) their role in the county and state 4-H program, (c) new educational opportunities for youth, and (d) their own skills, interests, and preferences. Volunteers also identified 25 specific concepts they learned during the track, including how to:

- Reach out to new youth in the community.
- Work with members to set club goals.
- Make meetings fun with icebreakers and new educational techniques.
- Help officers plan and conduct a business meeting each month.
- Use Parliamentary Procedure.
- Teach character and ethics education.
- Address conflict before it escalates.
- Encourage participation in opportunities outside the county.

In written responses, participants said the following.

- (I am) aware of educational opportunities for children (who are) not into sports.
- I know more people in my county now.
- Wow! I am energized for the year! Thank you.

Implications

Volunteers are willing to participate in education when it is available at opportune times and places. More educational needs are met for a greater number of 4-H volunteers when diverse learning opportunities are available. As a result, more volunteers are prepared to fulfill the 4-H youth development mission, as outlined in the *National Framework for 4-H Volunteerism* (Stone & Edwards, 2008), to create safe environments, engage volunteers, understand the benefits of

volunteering, and strengthen partnerships.

Recommendations

A parallel learning track for volunteers can be offered during youth development programming, at: project workdays, day camps, residential camps, and livestock judging workshops. At least one topic in a volunteer track could connect to youth programming (Figure 1).

Figure 1.
Topic Ideas for Parallel Volunteer Learning Tracks

Practice the steps for experiential learning in every project at the work day
Learn how to use the science inquiry method in all 4-H experiences at the day camp
Identify ways to help youth learn <i>independence, generosity, and belonging</i> as defined in the <i>4-H Essential Elements</i> and experienced at a residential camp
Learn how to promote youth development principles at livestock judging events or contests

After implementing the Parallel Volunteer Learning Track for 2 years, recommendations are to:

- Acknowledge adult chaperone responsibilities.
- Understand that the adult learning environment may be interrupted by youth needs.
- Schedule volunteer workshops to begin later and conclude earlier than youth programming.
- Locate volunteer sessions in same facility as youth.
- Plan networking time for adults to learn from other volunteers.

Participant evaluations and staff observations provided data for these recommendations. More research is needed to understand how to use parallel volunteer learning tracks even more effectively.

Conclusion

When volunteers have different levels of experience and a broad range of needs, they benefit from having an educational environment that includes diverse topics, a variety of educators, and varied learning methods.

Adult learners value opportunities to use their volunteer time effectively and efficiently. All HDLR participants reported they would attend a Parallel Volunteer Learning Track during a multi-county youth event again. The track was effective in that it (a) met a variety of needs, (b) involved diverse topics and presenters, and (c) was interactive and fun. The Parallel Volunteer Learning Track was efficient because it (a) reduced travel costs for some participants, (b) saved planning time, and (c) used common facilities, resources, and guest presenters with teen participants at the High Desert Leadership Retreat. A parallel volunteer learning track contributes to effective and efficient volunteer development during any county, multi-county, or state youth programming.

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