

## Whatever It Takes: A Comparison of Youth Enrollment Trends in the 4-H Livestock and Non-Livestock Programs

### Abstract

The study reported here compared participation and retention of youth enrolled in livestock and non-livestock 4-H programs. Participating 4-H members completed an assessment tool regarding their experiences in traditional 4-H programs, reasons they did not participate in such programs, and their experiences within 4-H. The researchers examined whether more frequent participation in 4-H programs was associated with youth retention in county 4-H programs. The authors identified the benefits youth receive from remaining in 4-H, as well as factors distinguishing between those youth with an affinity for traditional programs and those who choose to participate in non-traditional 4-H activities.

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### Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Like many programs that serve a diverse age range of youth, the 4-H organization's participation levels reflect highest among elementary school- and middle school-aged youth. Although these programs are critical in helping youth gain access to positive youth development, there has been a noticeable decline in enrollment numbers in subsequent years (Albright, 2008; Harder, Lamm, Lamm, Rose, & Rask, 2005; Russell & Heck, 2008; Nutt, 2008). As a result, youth development professionals have expressed concern that young people enrolled in youth programs tend to drop out as they reach early adolescence (Russell & Heck, 2008; Nutt, 2008; Harder et al., 2005). This is occurring at a stage of life when they are in most need of the constructive opportunities that structured youth programs can provide. There has been some discourse that suggests that the opportunities available to youth correlate with their participation within an organization (McClelland, 1987). Hence, youth development professionals are challenged with not only retaining youth in programs, but also keeping them fully engaged in activities they enjoy while promoting skill development.

Scholars have identified several factors that affect youth enrollment in 4-H. From the relationships established through friendships that maintain participation (Wingenbach, Nestor, Lawrence, Gartin, Woloshuk, & Mulkeen, 2000; Gottlieb, Lewis, & Heinsohn, 1974; Gill, Ewing, & Bruce, 2010) to the unique leadership experiences that boosts confidence and abilities as decision makers, there are clear benefits that can motivate youth to remain engaged. No programs in 4-H have been immune to the difficulties of youth retention. One experiencing such rapid decline in participation is the 4-H Livestock program.

### Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of the study reported here was to gain an in-depth understanding of youth participation levels in county 4-H programs. The primary goal was to determine if youth involved in the 4-H livestock program had

higher retention rates (in 4-H) than those participants who were not enrolled in the livestock programs. The authors aimed to address the following objectives:

1. Identify factors that influence youth participation in 4-H programs.
2. Compare the retention of youth participating in the 4-H livestock programs to that of youth participating in non-livestock 4-H programs.
3. Compare levels of involvement in 4-H activities between youth enrolled in 4-H livestock programs and youth enrolled in non-livestock programs.

## Methods

The approach of the study consisted of a qualitative methods design in nature, to examine retention of youth participating in county-based 4-H programs. An evaluation tool was developed by the researchers to assess the perceptions of youth participating in 4-H programs, more specifically those in livestock and non-livestock related programs. The study design was a static (intact) group comparison, gathering data one point in time (Campbell & Stanley, 1963). The tool used both multiple choice and open-ended questions. Multiple-choice questions were used to compare participation levels of the youth participants. Those items that were structured as open-ended questions allowed the participants to reveal information based on their experiences.

## Findings

The evaluation tool was administered to 160 youth (90 4-H livestock participants and 70 participants who were not involved in livestock-related programs) across 10 Kentucky counties. Those youth who were not enrolled in livestock programs participated in various 4-H initiatives, including SET projects, leadership development, natural resources, shooting sports, gardening, photography, public speaking, and fashion. The participants involved in 4-H were purposefully selected as a sample of convenience. Therefore, the generalizability of the results does not extend beyond these participants/groups. There were more non-livestock youth in elementary grades than those participating in livestock programs. For the middle school age range, there was a larger number of livestock participants compared to non-livestock participants. The livestock and non-livestock programs had similar numbers for high school-aged youth (Table 1).

**Table 1.**  
Grade Level of Participants

|               | Grades 3-5 | Grades 6-8 | Grades 9-12 | H.S. Graduates |
|---------------|------------|------------|-------------|----------------|
| Livestock     | 25 (28%)   | 42 (47%)   | 22 (24%)    | 1 (1%)         |
| Non-Livestock | 41 (59%)   | 11 (16%)   | 17 (24%)    | 1 (1%)         |

The trend of declining populations of older youth in 4-H was revealed in the findings. For both groups, high school-aged youth only represented 24% of the total number of those surveyed within each group. While the livestock program had more (42) middle school-aged youth, the non-livestock group only had 11 youth in this age grouping. Based on the data collected, participants in non-livestock programs reflect the trend of youth dropping out beginning in early adolescence, more specifically around 11-13 years of age (middle school age). The livestock youth in the study had an increase in participation levels within elementary and

middle school, with a noticeable decline in high school-aged youth. Table 1 indicates that 4-H youth professionals may witness moderate increases among livestock participants in elementary school, as compared to more significant decreases in participation among students in middle school and those entering high school.

The data from the study revealed that youth participating in the livestock program stay enrolled in the 4-H program longer than those in non-livestock programs (Table 2). The data shows that 43% of all the livestock youth were enrolled longer than 4 years, while only 15% of non-livestock youth were enrolled for the same period of time. When examining those new to 4-H, 43% of participants in non-livestock programs responded that they had been enrolled less than 1 year, while only 20% of livestock youth were new to the organization.

**Table 2.**  
Years Enrolled in Program for Both Livestock and Non-Livestock Youth

|                            | <b>Less than 1 year</b> | <b>Percentage</b> | <b>1-3 years</b> | <b>Percentage</b> | <b>4-6 years</b> | <b>Percentage</b> | <b>7+ years</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|----------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|------------------|-------------------|------------------|-------------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| Livestock Participants     | 18                      | 20%               | 33               | 37%               | 26               | 29%               | 13              | 14%               |
| Non-Livestock Participants | 30                      | 43%               | 29               | 42%               | 8                | 11%               | 3               | 4%                |

In regards to those participants who considered dropping out of 4-H, similar numbers of non-livestock and livestock youth were found. Approximately 10% of the non-livestock youth and 13% of the livestock youth had thought of dropping out of 4-H at some point in time. The most popular reason was due to time constraints. Youth also indicated being "bored with learning the same things," as well as "disagreeing with all the rules," and "having other interests" as reasons why they considered dropping out.

Both groups were asked why they joined 4-H (Table 3). Overall, there were several meaningful reasons why youth join 4-H, many of which have been similar to reasons discovered in other related studies. Table 3 provides information on the various reasons young people still choose 4-H as an organization of choice.

**Table 3.**  
Why Youth Decided to Join 4-H

|               | <b>Friends were in 4-H</b> | <b>Family was involved in 4-H</b> | <b>Wanted to have fun</b> | <b>Asked to join</b> | <b>Try new things</b> | <b>Participate in 4-H activities</b> | <b>Participate in other 4-H events</b> | <b>Parents signed me up</b> | <b>Help others in my community</b> | <b>Become a better leader</b> |
|---------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|--|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| livestock     | 42<br>47%                  | 63<br>70%                         | 55<br>61%                 | 22<br>24%            | 50<br>56%             | 56<br>62%                            | 62<br>69%                              | 23<br>26%                   | 34<br>38%                          | 45<br>50%                     |
| non-livestock | 32<br>46%                  | 19<br>27%                         | 52<br>74%                 | 23<br>33%            | 41<br>59%             | 42<br>60%                            | 36<br>51%                              | 16<br>23%                   | 25<br>36%                          | 26<br>37%                     |

Percentages were determined based on the number of youth within each group (livestock and non-livestock) who selected each answer; total = 90 livestock youth and 70 non-livestock youth.

Seventy percent of the livestock youth responded that they joined 4-H because their "family was involved in 4-H" (Table 3). These findings build upon previous research indicating that parents have a large influence on a young person's choice to join 4-H. On the other hand, only 27% of the non-livestock youth indicated that family was a reason they joined 4-H. Sixty-nine percent of livestock youth indicated that "participating in other 4-H events" (e.g., county fairs, show events, etc.) was a reason for joining 4-H, while 51% of the non-livestock youth noted this as a priority.

Table 4 illustrates the participants' responses to why they stayed involved in 4-H. Fun/Enjoyment was the most common answer among both livestock and non-livestock youth, followed by other responses.

**Table 4.**  
Reasons Why Youth Remain Active in 4-H

| <b>Reasons Why Youth Remained Active in 4-H</b>   | <b>4-H Youth Enrolled in Livestock Programs</b> | <b>4-H Youth Enrolled in Non-Livestock (4-H) Programs</b> |
|---|---|---|
| Other Youth   | 52<br>(58%)                                     | 39<br>(56%)   |
| Fun/Enjoyment   | 73<br>(81%)                                     | 55<br>(79%)   |
| New Things  | 67<br>(74%)                                     | 45<br>(64%)   |
| 4-H Activities  | 70<br>(78%)                                     | 49<br>(70%)   |
| Other 4-H Events  | 68<br>(76%)                                     | 41<br>(59%)   |
| Parents   | 34<br>(38%)                                     | 29<br>(41%)   |
| Helping Others  | 42<br>(47%)                                     | 32<br>(46%)   |
| Awards  | 57<br>(63%)                                     | 34<br>(49%)   |
| Leadership  | 49<br>(54%)                                     | 26<br>(37%)   |
| Money   | 5<br>(6%)                                       |   |
| Percentages were determined based on the number of youth within each group (livestock and non-livestock) who selected each answer; total = 90 livestock youth and 70 non-livestock youth. |   |   |

## Summary

Data collected shows that participants in non-livestock programs follows the trend addressed by Russell and Heck (2008), Nutt (2008), and Harder et al. (2005), that young people enrolled in 4-H youth development programs tend to drop out as they approach early adolescence (ages 11-13). The livestock youth in the study reflect the findings of Albright (2008), that there is a tendency for declines in high school-aged youth participation. Within the study, the number of livestock youth decreased significantly between the number of eighth graders who participated (13 participants) and the number of ninth grade participants (a total of five youth).

The decline in older youth participation is often attributed to opportunities outside of an organization (i.e., 4-H). In the middle and high school years, youth have more opportunities of interest that are available to them (e.g., school athletics, band, school clubs, advanced classes, and jobs), in addition to having more responsibilities (e.g., homework, chores at home). While these activities are typically viewed as common reasons why youth drop out of 4-H, there is very little research documenting this claim.

The current study found that conflicts with other activities were indeed a major factor in the retention of older 4-H youth. Time constraints were the most popular answer when asked if the youth had ever thought of dropping out of 4-H. Even some programs within 4-H requires youth to commit significant time and energy towards activities and service. For instance, youth involved in the livestock program dedicate considerable amounts of time toward the care, training, and exhibiting of their livestock, as well as adhering to the required guidelines in order to exhibit in any shows. Between these rules and the amount of time necessary to show an animal, conflicts can arise with other activities, especially during the summer, when a young person may choose to engage in leisure activities or work to earn additional income.

Youth participate in the 4-H program for numerous reasons. From the current study, youth from both livestock and non-livestock programs stated that the reason they joined, participated, and stayed in 4-H was because it was fun and they enjoyed the program. Friends, leaders, and agents were also influences on both livestock and non-livestock youth enrolling, participating, and staying in 4-H. This trend follows McClelland's Motivational Needs Theory that youth are motivated to participate within an organization to meet their need for affiliation and achievement (McClelland, 1987). The researchers examined the affiliation factor of McClelland's model through the following questions: "Why did you join 4-H?" and "Why did you stay involved?" Youth participants responded to these questions with friends, peers, volunteer leaders, and agents as the most significant factors influencing their participation.

Through 4-H programs, youth meet peers who have similar interests to their own. In livestock clubs, the youth often spend a great deal of time with peers, their parents, and volunteers. The relationships a young person establishes between these individuals give participants a sense of affiliation (Gill et al., 2010). Based on feedback gathered using the assessment tool, a few livestock and non-livestock youth noted a sense of achievement when asked why they stayed in 4-H (McClelland, 1987). Through livestock clubs, youth exhibiting animals competitively stimulate a sense of achievement through their efforts. The sense of achievement that livestock youth receive from their success could be a contributing factor as to why they stay involved longer within 4-H. These youth fulfill their need for achievement through the accomplishment of goals and projects that the 4-H program offers.

The 4-H organization offers youth many opportunities for participation. The researchers assessed youth engagement in specific 4-H programs. Overall, livestock youth had higher participation levels in terms of variety of projects and programs. This trend could be due to most livestock youth staying involved longer within the 4-H program and having more time to join and participate in other 4-H activities.

## Recommendations

More efforts should be put forth to keep youth interested in the programs that 4-H can offer. All 4-H youth development professionals who are interested in developing programs may increase the retention rates of youth by considering the following:

1. Since other opportunities may often be a factor in older youth not re-enrolling in the 4-H program, perhaps 4-H should consider working more closely in a collaborative manner with local partners.
2. Older youth can serve as mentors to their younger peers, thus providing a more effective educational experience for younger members (Ponzio, Junge, Smith, Manglallan, & Peterson, 2000). By engaging older 4-H members as volunteers, their communication and leadership skills are enhanced, along with the development of additional life skills and educational experiences of younger youth. As the older youth are given a meaningful role that encourages their continued participation, this also sends a message to the younger youth that they will also have a chance to contribute as teens (and beyond).
3. Aim to increase parental awareness and involvement by promoting 4-H livestock, traditional, and non-traditional Extension programs. It is also helpful to solicit the skills and talents of those parents who have children enrolled as participants.
4. Don't underestimate the importance of process evaluation. Assess on a regular basis whether youth are fully engaged by asking them directly. Be sure that flexibility is practiced, thus allowing youth to explore multiple interests. This encourages young people to take an active role in their own development.

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