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4-H Youth Development: The Past, the Present, and the Future

Abstract

The 4-H Program within Cooperative Extension is more than 100 years old. As we celebrate 100 years of Cooperative Extension, the foundation built by the 4-H Program serves as grounds to meet the needs of today's youth. The diversity of the youth who participate continues to grow, families continue to become less traditional, potential volunteers' time continues to shrink, and the growing number of digital devices steal time. These changes demand 4-H adapt and innovate to remain relevant. This commentary examines the role that 4-H Youth Development will play in the next 100 years to face these challenges.



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The 4-H Pledge:

*I pledge my head to clearer thinking,
my heart to greater loyalty,
my hands to larger service,
and my health to better living,
for my club, my community, my country and my world.*

A Rich History

The 4-H pledge provides a foundational understanding of the goals of this more than 100 year-old youth development program. This comprehensive approach to youth development offers young people important developmental opportunities to foster a successful transition to young adulthood. The 4-H Program was created in the late 1890's and early 1900's in response to the need for better agriculture education. The 4-H Program started as an innovative outreach program for the land-grant universities' Cooperative Extension Service. The 4-H Program has grown from a simple idea to the nation's largest youth serving organization, reaching more than seven million youth in rural farming communities, urban neighborhoods, and suburban schoolyards, with more than 60 million alumni (National 4-H Council, 2014). In a review of literature, Scholl (2004) discovered that from 1911 to 2002, almost 1,550 studies were conducted focused on the 4-H Program across 130 institutions worldwide. Thus, the impact of the 4-H Program on applied research and future leaders extends beyond any single youth development program (National 4-H Council, Press Release, 2014).

The 4-H Motto, "To Make the Best Better," encapsulates the focus of the program, namely empowering youth with the tools and knowledge needed to *reach their full potential, while working and learning in partnership with caring adults*. The 4-H Program is grounded in experiential learning principles that provide a "hands on" approach to learning. This type of learning provides the opportunity to transfer key learnings from the young people who participate in these programs to their families. For instance, the 4-H Program project referred to as "Corn Clubs" developed in the early 1900's by A.B. Graham is an example of that transfer of learning from youth to adult. Graham established experimental corn plots and worked closely with boys in an afterschool setting to assess the findings. Programs for girls followed shortly, focused on learning such needed skills as sewing and canning. The approach of "learning by doing" continues throughout the 4-H Program today as programs evolve and grow to fit the ever-changing needs of youth and families living in the 21st century. For example, the Rockets to the Rescue 4-H project was designed by University of Arizona Cooperative Extension and selected as the winning experiment *for the seventh annual 4-H National Youth Science Day (4-H NYSD)*. This project built aerodynamic crafts designed to deliver food to natural disaster victims (National 4-H Council, Press Release, 2014).

The Present Challenges

While the foundation of all Extension programs remains based in agriculture, with livestock and agriculture clubs still thriving, the 4-H Program of today has evolved into a complex and forward-thinking system that was unimaginable more than 100 years ago. Today, 4-H Programs offer important opportunities for learning skills related to science, math, technology, and socialization. Programs offer young people a context in which to develop critical life skills, foster citizenship, and promote leadership. The overarching challenge of today's 4-H Youth Development Program lies in its ability to maintain a commitment to mission and tradition, while addressing the changing needs of today's youth in an ever-evolving diverse society as we journey through the 21st century.

Volunteers

As a university-, community-based organization steeped in rich tradition, the 4-H Program is managed by Extension educators, while clubs are led by adult volunteers. Similar to many volunteer-based

organizations, 4-H Programs are grappling with how to maintain capacity given the significant decline in the number of available adult volunteers, due in part to changes in America's population demographics, family structure, and increase in dual earner households. The demand for volunteers is even more complex because of the need to live in the communities in which the young people live; therefore reflecting local culture and values. Adult volunteers are the backbone of the 4-H Program and have been at the base of the success of 4-H since its inception. Currently, there are more than 540,000 volunteers who commit their time and talents to the 4-H Program (National 4-H Council, 2012). Volunteers play an important role in the success of the 4-H Program. Nevertheless, the need to recruit, train, and retain volunteers represents a major challenge to be addressed.

Professional Development and Training

Adult volunteers play a critical role in the 4-H Program, and their preparation is essential. Attracting and training dedicated adults will largely shape the 4-H Program over the next several decades. The professional development and training of the adults who lead youth programs is essential because there is a growing body of evidence that the quality of the program influences the benefits that youth acquire through participation (Borden, Schlomer, & Wiggs, 2011; King & Safrit, 1998). The 4-H Program has a strong history of providing safe environments that promote youth exploration and understanding of their environment both locally and globally, support youth in acquiring life skills (e.g., decision-making, critical thinking, and social-emotion skills), and foster a sense of belonging with peers, and adults.

Indeed, empirical research has provided strong evidence that youth development programs that embody the philosophy and ethos similar to those of the 4-H Program can, and do, foster positive developmental outcomes, including increased life skills, increased workforce skills, and active engagement in the community through citizenship and leadership (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Hamilton & Hamilton, 2004). Although 4-H continues to grow into a global organization, the challenge of meeting this global expansion requires dynamic, appropriate, and accessible professional development products to assure quality 4-H Program delivery (4-H Youth Development Organization, 2012).

Program Evaluation

While today's Extension and 4-H Programs maintain their commitment to creating optimal learning environments for youth, accountability in all youth development programs is severely lacking. Increased awareness of these evidence-based programs among practitioners and the pressure from policymakers and funders for greater effectiveness and accountability (in the form of mandating legislation such as the No Child Left Behind Act, Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA), and Safe and Drug-Free Schools Act) have propelled many community-based service sectors to initiate evaluations of their programs. Moreover, with the enactment of the GPRA by Congress, state and county governments are required to collect impact data showing accountability and the beneficial impact of funds invested in youth development. Embedded within the land-grant university system, 4-H needs to lead the way in evaluating its efforts in terms of outcomes and program quality. However, the lack of standardization of implementation must be addressed before any major evaluation effort can occur. Beyond the lack of standardization of implementation of any specific 4-H curriculum, the

costs and time commitments are clear barriers to the execution of strong evaluations.

The Future Response to Challenges

To address the challenges that the Cooperative Extension 4-H Program faces in the future, it must become a more nimble organization, addressing the complex needs of young people from diverse backgrounds and settings. The 4-H Program must consider the following as it moves into the future:

- Continue to expand its focus on research-based curricula. These efforts must reflect curricula that are of the highest quality, enabling all young people to achieve their potential, while engaging youth in the 21st century.
- Transition the program from a youth development organization to a more focused community youth development organization (Mincemoyer & Perkins, 2001), forming partnerships between the young people and the community at large.
- Empower youth to lead healthy, satisfying, productive lives. Skills learned in 4-H can build competence to earn a living, engage in civic activities, nurture others, and participate in cultural activities.
- Provide asynchronous learning opportunities for adult volunteers, empowering them with skills to support youth in decision-making and leadership.
- Provide comprehensive professional development for all adults needing to be comfortable engaging young people in constructive and challenging activities that build their competence and foster supportive relationships.
- Continue the focus on youth participation at every step of the programming process (e.g., planning, implementation, and evaluation) and simultaneously promote youth participation in their community.
- Conduct comprehensive research and evaluation studies that are focused on the goals of the organization.
- View evaluation as a core implementation task for all 4-H Programs and projects. 4-H needs to be leading the way in using innovative evaluative methods to determine effectiveness and improve programming.

Conclusion

The Extension programs of tomorrow will empower young people to be active members of their community, providing direction, insight, energy, and leadership. Within its youth development program, 4-H, youth are called upon to be full contributors to their community when they are called upon to employ the skills and competencies that they are developing. Indeed, youth have a right, and a civic responsibility, to participate and contribute to their communities. Youth participation involves learning and working that is woven throughout the community, not just in specific projects (Pittman,

Ferber, & Irby, 2000). If engaged as partners, youth can be powerful change agents for the betterment of their community as embodied in the 4-H Pledge.

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