

## Regionalization of the Washington State University Extension 4-H Youth Development Program: Employee Awareness, Buy-In, and Communication

### Abstract

Washington's 4-H program is transitioning from a predominately single-county faculty model to a regional system. This article highlights survey results regarding the level of awareness and buy-in that Extension administration, faculty, and staff have concerning the regional model and how communication about the model took place. While most employees were aware of the change, the majority learned through informal conversation, either alone or in combination with formal communication. Those who learned through both formal and informal methods felt more knowledgeable and more comfortable assessing the model's merit. Our research recommends that administrators purposefully emphasize formal communication during staffing model transitions.

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### Introduction

The Washington State University (WSU) Extension 4-H Youth Development program is undergoing a statewide shift from a single-county faculty model to a regional model where 4-H Youth Development faculty provide leadership over multiple counties. This transition is a complex and fluid process that was prompted by numerous administrative and funding changes and supported by input from a statewide needs assessment. The primary objective of the study reported here was to assess the level of awareness and buy-in that Extension administration, faculty, and staff have concerning the new regional model and how information about the model and restructuring process was communicated to them. The study also evaluated the employees' overall level of understanding regarding the regional model's structure and purpose by identifying common concerns and misunderstandings. However, this article only reports on the study's primary objective.

### Need for Regionalization

Over the past 15 years WSU Extension has experienced system-wide changes, including funding cuts

and reorganization of the administrative and leadership structure. Funding cuts occurred over several years, including a 50% reduction in permanent base funding from 2008 to 2010. During this same period, the WSU Extension administrative structure changed from geographic districts to statewide program units aligned by content area (i.e., Youth and Families, Community and Economic Development, and Agriculture and Natural Resources), and the WSU 4-H Youth Development program conducted an in-depth assessment with internal and external evaluators. Findings from this statewide assessment indicated a need for increased faculty leadership capacity, shifting emphasis away from management in order to improve program quality and enhance cross-county resource sharing, collaborative efforts, collective outcome reporting, and professional development (WSU 4-H Program Review, 2009).

The "Regional Specialist Model" (subsequently referred to as the regional model) was identified by administration as the best way to address the concerns and recommendations highlighted by the assessment while operating within new budget realities and under a new program unit structure. Disruptive innovations, like the regional model, help organizations survive uncertain economic climates and evolving clientele demands (Franz & Cox, 2012). Implementation of the model began in 2011 with the hiring of WSU Extension's first 4-H Youth Development Regional Specialist. By 2014, four 4-H Youth Development Regional Specialists were in place, providing leadership for nearly a quarter of Washington's 4-H Youth Development county programs.

## Organizational Climate

The swift pace of these institutional changes, especially the funding cuts, resulted in perceptions of low job security and caused significant erosion of the relationship and trust between WSU administration and its employees (Probst, Benson, Graso, Jiang, & Olson, 2011). According to the Probst et al. (2011) feedback report, which showcased the effects of the recent budget cuts on faculty and staff at WSU, 97% of surveyed chairs/deans/directors agreed or strongly agreed that recent budget cuts had negatively affected faculty morale. Taking this dissatisfaction to the next level, 85% of surveyed chairs/deans/directors indicated that their faculty members were looking for employment elsewhere. Within the 4-H Youth Development program, high turnover rates had already been a consistent challenge, with an average employee turnover of 20% since 2000 (BoyEs, 2010).

Survey results from Probst et al. (2011) indicated Extension staff generally felt more positive than WSU staff as a whole; however, Extension employees (faculty and staff) still reported overall high levels of dissatisfaction, a perceived lack of control, no voice in decision making, and poor information transparency from the administration. The survey results indicate that the recent changes and significant declines in employee satisfaction, coupled with high and potentially growing employee turnover rates, have fostered a chaotic work environment. In environments perceived as chaotic, maintaining and building employee buy-in during organizational restructuring processes is an imperative task faced by leaders (McKinley & Scherer, 2000). These disconcerting results suggest a potential lack of employee awareness and buy-in regarding transition plans, such as the 4-H Youth Development regional model.

## Methods

## Instrument & Data Collection

The preliminary study reported here was the first step in understanding the dynamics surrounding the model transition. Further research will be conducted to establish the validity and reliability of the survey instrument and data.

The survey instrument was a 12-item online questionnaire. In addition to questions regarding the regional model, demographic variables, such as program unit affiliation, position title, and level of responsibility within 4-H Youth Development were collected. The questionnaire was anonymous, and position titles were generalized to protect subjects' identities. The generalized position titles were staff (county program coordinators/assistants and office support staff), faculty (county, regional, and state-level faculty not serving as a county director), and county director (faculty serving as a county director).

After receiving human subjects research exemption from WSU's Institutional Review Board, survey invitations were emailed to WSU Extension staff and faculty within the Youth and Family Program Unit, all WSU Extension county directors, and program unit directors. Survey invitations were sent to a total of 222 subjects. Survey responses were collected for 2 weeks, with 98 subjects participating, yielding a 44% response rate.

## Data Analysis

All data reported in this article were tabulated and calculated using Microsoft Excel. Of the 12 survey questions, initial emphasis was placed on the items that addressed the participants' awareness and buy-in of the regional model, as well as how participants learned about the model change. In addition, importance was also placed on identifying common responses and interesting outliers across and within demographic variables (i.e., position title, level of 4-H Youth Development responsibility). In this analysis, informal conversation is defined as casual conversation with colleagues and/or coworkers and not as part of a training or presentation regarding the model. Conversely, formal communication is defined as documents shared (either in-print or online), formal communications in-person, or trainings/presentations supported by WSU Extension administration or leadership.

## Results

### Participant Demographics

74% of survey participants were members of the Youth and Families Extension Program Unit, with the remainder of the participants equally divided between WSU's two other Extension program units: Agriculture and Natural Resources and Community and Economic Development.

As seen in Table 1, survey participants were nearly equally split between position levels recognized by the survey. In addition, 79% of respondents reported work responsibilities within 4-H Youth Development, including leading, managing, and/or delivering programs.

**Table 1.**

Participant Position Level & Responsibilities Within 4-H Youth Development

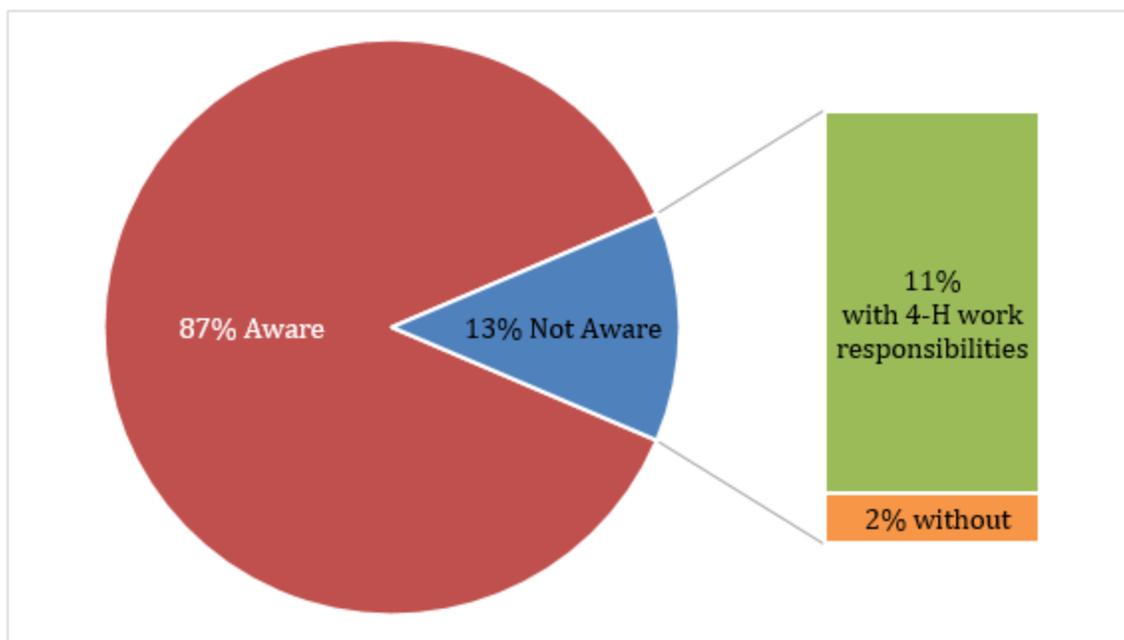
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Participant Position Level	% Represented in Survey	% with 4-H Responsibilities
County Director	28%	19%
Faculty	36%	26%
Staff	36%	34%
Totals	100%	79%

## Employee Awareness of Model Change

87% of respondents were aware that Washington's 4-H Youth Development program was transitioning to a regional model (Figure 1). This percentage was the same for participants with or without 4-H responsibilities. The majority of those not aware of the model transition reported having work responsibilities within 4-H Youth Development.

**Figure 1.**  
Awareness of Regional Model Transition



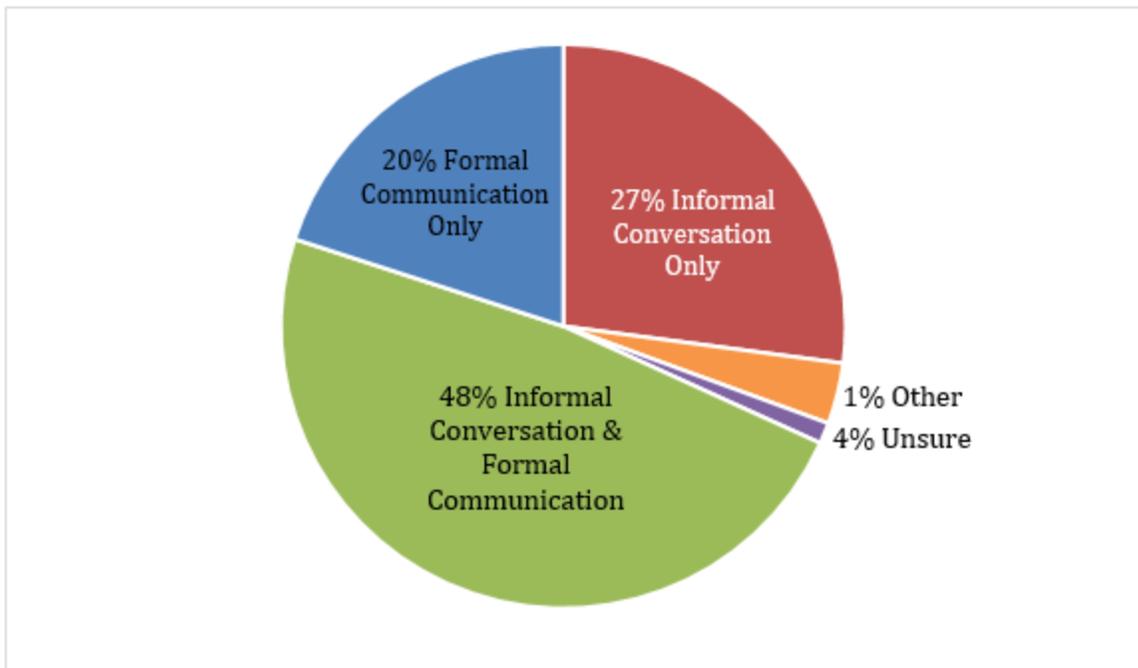
## Employee Communication & Learning

Figure 2 displays how those aware of the model change learned the most about it. Seventy-five percent identified informal conversation as a way in which they learned the majority of what they know about the regional model, and 27% of participants reported informal conversation as their only major source of information (57% of whom have 4-H responsibilities). In comparison, only 20% of respondents identified formal communication as their only major source (83% of whom have 4-H responsibilities). Nearly half (48%) of respondents felt that both informal conversation and formal communication played a major role in developing their understanding. Nearly a third of the respondents (32%) did not identify any kind of formal communication as playing a major role in

developing their understanding of the regional model.

**Figure 2.**

Communication Method in Which Employees Learned About the Regional Model



As seen in Table 2, County Directors were significantly more likely to identify formal communication as their only major source of information ( $\chi^2(1, N = 75) = 9.23, p = .00$ ). While there were no other statistically significant relationships between position level and communication method, the results did indicate a possible pattern. The more distant a position level is from higher administrative levels the more likely it was for members of that position level to report learning mainly through informal means. While this pattern was not statistically significant, this association is suggestive and future research may clarify its validity.

**Table 2.**

Participant Position Level in Relation to Communication Method  
(\*statistically significant)

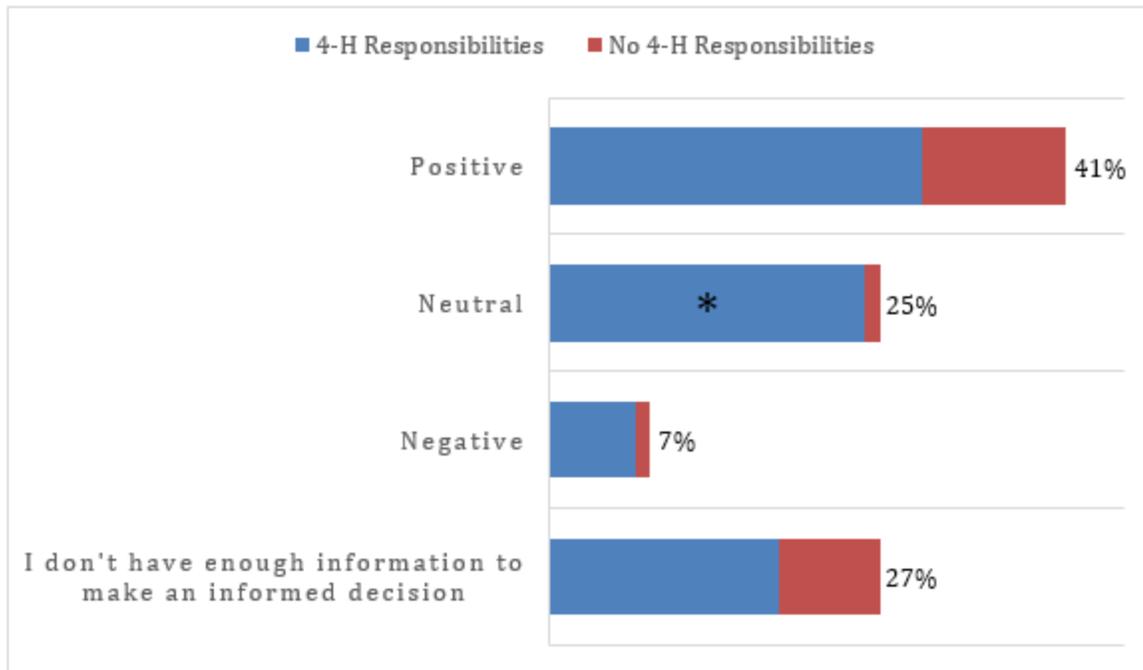
Participant Position Level	% Reported Formal Communication Only	% Reported Informal Communication Only
County Director	45%*	14%
Faculty	14%	24%
Staff	13%	38%

## Employee Buy-In

Participants with 4-H responsibilities, regardless of position level, were significantly more likely to have neutral feelings about the model in comparison to participants without 4-H responsibilities ( $\chi^2(1, N =$

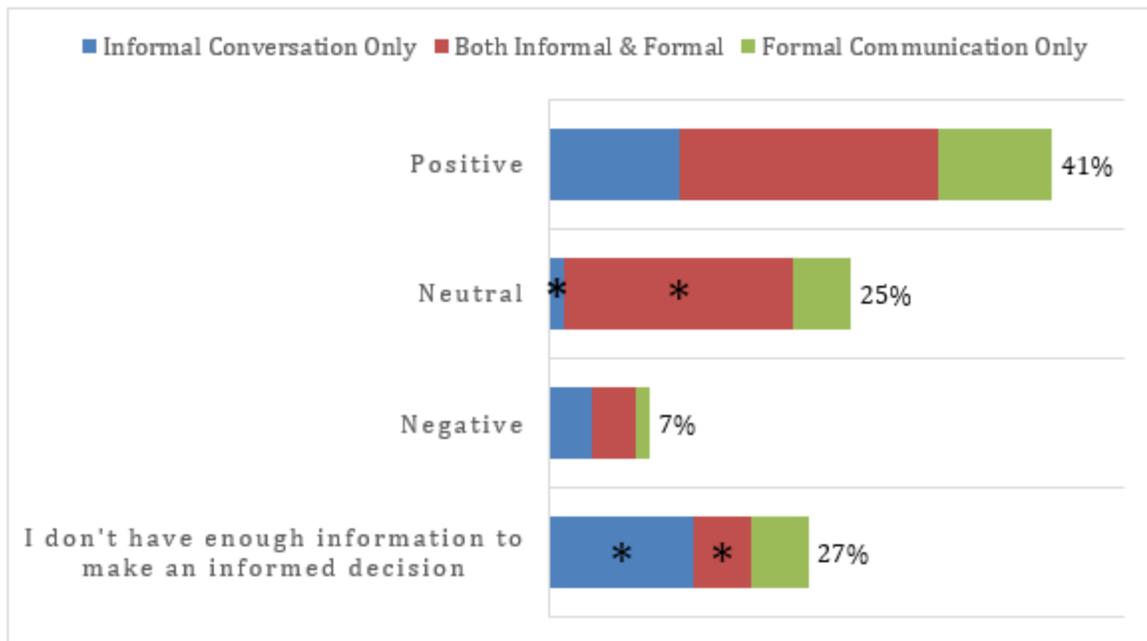
89) = 5.34,  $p = .02$ ; Figure 3). There was no statistically significant relationship between this subset and positive or negative reactions or a need for more information.

**Figure 3.**  
Employee Buy-in in Relation to 4-H Responsibilities  
(\*statistically significant)



A participant's position within WSU Extension did not have a statistically significant bearing on their feeling about the model, nor did it affect their need for more information. However, it is interesting to note that no county directors felt the model was a negative change. As seen in Figure 4, the communication method in which participants reported learning the majority of what they know about the regional model did have an effect.

**Figure 4.**  
Employee Buy-in in Relation to Communication Method  
(\*statistically significant)



Participants who identified informal conversation as their only major source of information were significantly less likely to feel the model was neutral ( $c^2(1, N = 81) = 7.79, p = .01$ ; Figure 4). This same subset was also significantly more likely to feel unable to make an informed decision about the model's merit without further information ( $c^2(1, N = 81) = 8.40, p = .00$ ; Figure 4). There was no statistically significant relationship between this subset and positive or negative reactions.

Conversely, respondents who identified formal communication and informal conversation both as major sources of information were significantly more likely to feel the model was neutral ( $c^2(1, N = 81) = 7.42, p = .01$ ; Figure 4). In addition, this same subset was also significantly less likely to feel unable to make an informed decision about the model's merit without further information ( $c^2(1, N = 81) = 7.47, p = .01$ ; Figure 4). There were no statistically significant relationships between this subset and positive or negative reactions. No statistically significant relationships were seen between having formal communication as the only major source of information and feelings toward the model.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

To strengthen awareness of and support for staffing model transitions, it is recommended that administration and those in leadership roles place strong emphasis on formal communication. While informal conversation surrounding staffing changes is inevitable, but valuable in building buy-in when trusted colleagues share informally, the accuracy of these conversations is directly linked to the quality and accessibility of formal communication disseminated by organizational leaders (Turner & Müller, 2004).

The study results show that in comparison to those who identified only one communication method, employees who learned through a combination of both formal and informal communication styles felt more knowledgeable about the model and were more comfortable assessing its merit. The work of Turner and Müller (2004) also identifies the mix of formal and informal communication methods as best practice.

Almost a third of surveyed employees reported informal conversation as their only major source of information, and they were significantly more likely to feel unable to judge the model's value due to a lack of information. While a percentage of employees from all position levels reported learning through informal means alone, County Directors were the only subset that was significantly more likely to identify formal communication as their only major source of information and the only position level subset with no members reporting that they felt the model change was negative. This could indicate that more formal communication was provided at higher levels and/or that less informal conversation took place, suggesting that voids in formal communication may be filled by informal conversation, which is less accurate than formal methods (Johnson, Donohue, Atkin, & Johnson, 1994; Mullins, 1999).

Therefore, it is recommended that formal communication be disseminated consistently to all position levels in order to promote buy-in, avoid unbalanced reliance on informal conversation, and decrease the potential for social disintegration (McKinley & Scherer, 2000). Formal communication openly accessible to all position levels, including community partners and key stakeholders, that takes place before transitions or early in the process helps to build trust, transparency, and buy-in (Holz-Clause, Koundinya, Glenn, & Payne, 2012; McKinley & Scherer, 2000).

Jespersion (2004) also emphasizes that transparency and open dialogue are key factors in successful regionalization efforts. Thus, to support regionalization success and enhance the effectiveness of formal communication, reference documents and tools (e.g., organizational charts, basic model designs, and budget information, etc.) could be created, maintained, and within easy reach of employees, community partners and key stakeholders (e.g., elected county officials and program volunteers) through online access, presentations, and open dialogue opportunities.

This strategy is further supported by the work of Holz-Clause et al. (2012), who found that intentionally designed and readily accessible communication (i.e., formal documents and presentations) may help alleviate concerns and build buy-in to positively promote change. Lack of access to formal communication, whether perceived or actual, may be an issue within the WSU Extension communication pipeline, since nearly a third of surveyed employees did not identify any kind of formal communication as playing a major role in developing their understanding of the regional model.

Research by Holz-Clause et al. (2012) also suggests that it is of paramount importance that all documents share a consistent message, are kept up to date, and promote a clearly articulated strategy powerfully linking the mission, objectives, and model plans. One such document that WSU Extension administration could use to increase formal communication is the statewide strategic plan for Washington's 4-H Youth Development program. This document could be updated to reflect the model change and the shift in emphasis from management to leadership, which precipitated regionalization, in addition to other key transitions in statewide focus recommended by the 2009 program review. This foundational piece could greatly aid in the communication of the current staffing and program plan during this restructuring to improve awareness, decrease social disintegration and build buy-in (McKinley & Scherer, 2000).

It's important to note that Washington 4-H Youth Development is still in the initial stages of

regionalization, a process that is continuously evolving to fit the changing needs of the university, local communities, and Extension employees. More research on the implementation of the regional model is warranted, particularly pertaining to how communication methods affect employee awareness and buy-in. The authors are currently analyzing the qualitative results from the secondary objective of the study, which evaluated the employees overall level of understanding regarding the regional model's structure and purpose in relation to communication methods and demographic variables.

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