

Program Standards and Expectations: Providing Clarity, Consistency, and Focus

Abstract

The effort described in this article resulted from requests for clarity and consistency from new and existing Extension/4-H educators as well as from recommendations by university auditors. The primary purpose of the effort was to clarify standards for effective county-based 4-H youth development programs and to help focus the roles of 4-H professionals in developing and maintaining effective programs that contribute to the 4-H mission and highest priority statewide needs. Five major categories of expectations for all county 4-H programs were identified on the basis of a related model for 4-H program delivery. The approach described may be useful across Extension for achieving improved program quality, program transformation, and effective dedication of resources.

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Consistent Program Quality Requires Program Consistency

One of Extension's strengths is its flexibility across counties and states to address local needs to achieve locally desired outcomes. However, this also is a potential weakness when it results in inconsistencies, inefficiencies, disparate program quality, or lack of contribution toward meaningful common outcomes. Strategic planning at state and national levels, introduction of common evaluation measures, and other efforts to set national priorities have facilitated the development of broad standards and goals. For example, Langellotto, Moen, Straub, & Dorn (2015) described newly developed national standards for the Extension master gardener (EMG) program intended to "set a bar against which EMG programs could judge their performance, or . . . could work towards, if they have not yet met a specific standard" ("Implications for Future Work," para. 1) and to "provide better guidance . . . and promote consistency" ("Implications for Future Work," para. 3). Still, national plans typically are not detailed enough to provide specific, measurable outcomes, and standards are not always realized at the local level. Furthermore, program inconsistencies across counties sometimes result from variations in budgets, staffing, socioeconomic factors, and so forth (Harder, Moore, Mazurkewicz, & Benge, 2013). Therefore, developing meaningful common program standards and expectations for an entire state that does not resort to a lowest-common-denominator approach is a formidable challenge and not without controversy.

Program quality "has its roots in how effectively central questions are addressed and linked to desired outcomes,

in each program phase. Quality indicators, then, are the principles guiding decision making and action processes . . . for setting priorities, channeling resources, and assessing effectiveness as programs unfold" (Mueller, 1991, "Minnesota Program Quality Statement," para. 2). A sensible program theory provides the basis for how programs are supposed to achieve those desired outcomes (W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 1998).

The needs for both program quality and consistency may represent a chicken-and-egg paradox but must be considered together because quality is difficult to address unless common standards and expectations can be established to ensure that consistent program quality can be achieved and maintained. The understanding that "quality is a major concern of education at all levels" (Mueller, 1991, "Quality Issue," para. 1) may explain why grading rubrics, national educational standards, testing, and other means of standardizing expectations and outcomes are prevalent. As a public institution, Extension is not immune to such societal norms and practices, nor should it be if it intends to remain relevant and be viewed as credible in providing educational programs with consistent quality.

Example: Statewide Standards and Expectations for 4-H Youth Development

The Extension 4-H youth development program is multifaceted due to its youth audience, dependence on trained volunteers, involvement of parents and alumni, and a variety of laws to which it must comply. This complexity can be difficult to understand and manage, so providing clarity and focus is particularly valuable. The document *4-H Program Standards & Expectations* (hereafter referred to as *Standards & Expectations*) (Diem, 2013) resulted from requests for clarity and consistency from new and existing Extension/4-H faculty in Florida as well as in response to recommendations from university auditors (University of Florida Office of Internal Audit, 2013). It was developed for the University of Florida (UF)/Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) Extension 4-H youth development program by the state 4-H program leader, with input from a variety of other Extension faculty and administrators. The primary purposes for developing the document were "to clarify standards for effective county-based 4-H Youth Development programs and to help focus the roles of 4-H faculty and staff in developing and maintaining effective programs that contribute to the mission and highest priority needs of Florida 4-H" (Diem, 2013, "Background and Purpose," para. 1). Five major categories of expectations for all county 4-H programs were identified on the basis of a relevant model for 4-H program delivery (Diem, 2013).

The document elaborates further on goals it was intended to achieve:

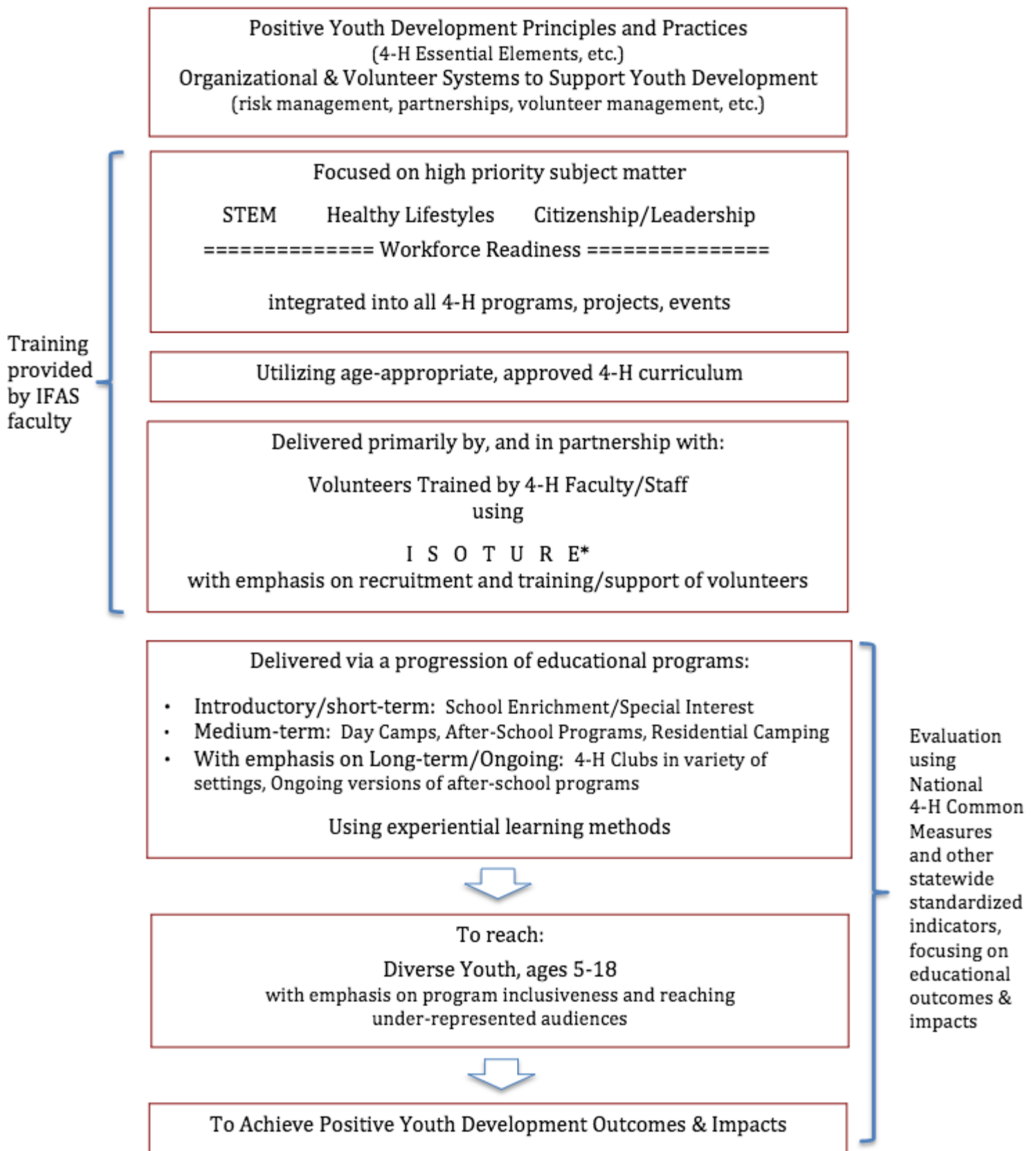
A key goal was to standardize core functions to provide consistency of county 4-H programs statewide; which represents about two-thirds of the overall 4-H program and the subsequent efforts of faculty members leading 4-H programs. This will not only assist in maintaining compliance with laws and policies (such as those related to youth protection and funds handling) but also free 4-H faculty from re-inventing the routine and allow them instead to focus their expertise and creativity on developing innovative programs and meeting unique local needs. It will also allow increased emphasis on the scholarship of youth development and volunteerism and provide clarity for plans of work, reports of accomplishment and, subsequently, performance appraisals. Lastly, it will help provide guidance to IFAS faculty without 4-H job titles contributing their expertise to the 4-H Youth Development Program.

. . . Specific tools and training will be provided to help IFAS/Extension faculty meet expectations and achieve standards via orientation, in-service training, online resources, EDIS [electronic data information source] publications, etc. (Diem, 2013, "Background and Purpose," paras. 1 & 5)

Initiative 7 of *UF/IFAS Extension Roadmap* (i.e., strategic plan) is titled "Preparing youth to be responsible citizens and productive members of the workforce." It addresses two priorities: (a) youth development and (b) developing organizational and volunteer systems to support youth development (University of Florida/Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Extension, 2012). A logic model was developed for each priority. The model for 4-H program delivery (Figure 1) integrated those two logic models and served as the means for graphically depicting the 4-H program standards and expectations on a single page, thereby providing an easy reference for stakeholders, new faculty and staff, and other interested parties. State and county Extension/4-H programs often have a general mission and goals and plans of work but not necessarily specific guidance for carrying everything out. Therefore, *Standards & Expectations*, and the model for 4-H program delivery it is based on, may be a useful framework for others considering how to focus an Extension program to achieve targeted outcomes with limited staff and other resources.

Figure 1.

Model for 4-H Program Delivery



*A model and process for volunteer management and development.

K. Diem, October 2013.

Common Expectations for County 4-H Programs

Figure 2 shows examples of standards and expectations in each of the five major categories that were identified

in *Standards & Expectations*. (Details are included in the complete document.)

Figure 2.

Five Major Categories of Expectations for County 4-H Programs

1. County 4-H Programs will offer educational programming that supports the mission of 4-H and program priorities set forth in the statewide plan.

- Emphasis will be placed on a combination of subject matter (STEM, Healthy Lifestyles, Citizenship/Leadership, with integration of Workforce Readiness) that meets local needs with guidance from local advisory groups (e.g. County 4-H Association). These will be integrated into all 4-H programs, projects, events, etc. when feasible.
- Programs that don't support Initiative 7 priorities should receive extra scrutiny and be considered prime candidates for being delegated to trained volunteers or phasing out.
- Evaluation using National *4-H Common Measures* and other statewide standardized indicators, focusing on educational outcomes and impacts, will be conducted.
- Approved, age-appropriate 4-H curriculum materials (from UF or other Land Grant University sources) utilizing experiential learning methods will be utilized and promoted.

2. All 4-H programs will aim to promote diversity and emphasize inclusiveness of youth and volunteers from all backgrounds.

- Program participation that represents the eligible youth population is expected. This requires not only marketing 4-H to underrepresented audiences but also offering a wide range of fun, educational programs of interest to those audiences.
- Whenever possible, rules and decisions will be made that are inclusive instead of exclusive. (Care should be taken that they do not readily favor or disadvantage any eligible 4-H audience.)
- Use targeted short-term programs (such as school enrichment/special interest programs) to reach under-represented audiences but aim to fully integrate them into the ongoing 4-H program.
- Utilize an intentional plan to carry out the Expansion and Review function of the County 4-H Association to target new audiences.

3. Faculty will train volunteers to deliver programs.

- In general, the county 4-H program should be youth-focused, agent-led, and volunteer-delivered.

- Focus on providing 4-H educational experiences that allow youth to be involved with a caring adult (typically trained 4-H volunteers).
- Faculty/staff will focus on recruiting and training volunteers and providing train-the-trainer programs. Volunteers will receive orientation and training. The *4-H Volunteer Training Series* (http://florida4h.org/volunteers/_resources/vts/) will be the basis for training. A combination of in-person and online training will be utilized.
- The majority of the time and effort of a County 4-H Agent needs to be dedicated toward maintaining a volunteer management system using the ISOTURE model for volunteer management and development (with emphasis on recruiting and training/supporting volunteers) and partnering with other organizations to accomplish the 4-H mission. This will require a shift from working directly with youth but is consistent with the Initiative 7 plan of action. "Train-the-Trainer" should be the predominant model for program delivery. This has the potential to reach the same or more youth with greater efficiency.
- The majority of youth participating in a county 4-H program should be the result of teaching and leadership by volunteers recruited and trained by faculty. The faculty member remains responsible for the overall 4-H program, the outcomes achieved, and the results reported.

4. Emphasis will be placed on medium- and long-term educational experiences.

- Although six hours involvement is the minimum to be reported as participation in a 4-H delivery mode, increased dosage and duration is more likely to result in positive youth development as revealed in research such as the Tufts University Study of Positive Youth Development.
- Focus on offering educational experiences that are in-depth and/or ongoing. Short-term experiences should be used as a means to introduce youth to longer-term and ongoing 4-H educational opportunities. (Basic definitions and examples were provided.)
- Youth and volunteers are encouraged to participate in multiple 4-H educational events and activities beyond the 4-H club.
- An effective 4-H Youth Development program results from a balance of quality educational programming and significant number of participants who reap the benefits of program offerings. (In other words, "numbers" and "quality.") Medium/long-term enrollment should be a significant percentage of total 4-H enrollment in a county. Target numbers for number of volunteers, 4-H clubs, 4-H club membership, camp counselors, summer camp attendance, etc. should be determined annually.

5. County 4-H programs will maintain management systems and leadership structures and offer common programs that strengthen the 4-H program locally and provide consistency statewide.

- Maintain an effective County 4-H Association (a program advisory and support group).
- Maintain an effective County 4-H Council (a leadership group for youth).
- Offer a "4-H County Events" program that features public speaking and other events representative of the 4-H project enrollment in the county, and provides an opportunity for youth to advance to district or state 4-H events.
- Offer and promote awards and recognition opportunities for youth and volunteers at the club, county, state, and national levels. They should be a balance of competitive and non-competitive opportunities.
- All youth of eligible age will be provided the opportunity to attend 4-H Summer Camp, not just those who are currently 4-H participants or 4-H club members. Minimum training for all counselors will be provided annually according to 4-H policy and using standard 4-H counselor training curriculum.
- Every county is expected to participate in 4-H University (an on-campus conference to develop leadership and skills). All youth of eligible age will be provided the opportunity to attend, not just award winners or current 4-H participants or 4-H club members.
- Fund raising, finances, grants and contracts, and tax reporting will conform to UF/IFAS Extension policies (including those at <http://florida4h.org/policies>)
- Comply with all laws and UF/IFAS Extension policies pertaining to youth protection, including background screening of prospective volunteers, and other training as required.
- Identify and promote all IFAS youth programs as UF/IFAS Extension 4-H Youth Development, following the IFAS Branding Guide. Refer to <http://ics.ifas.ufl.edu/branding.shtml>.
- Accurately, completely, and promptly report all 4-H youth and volunteer participation according to current definitions, via the 4HOnline enrollment system (<https://florida.4honline.com>).
- Programs will be evaluated regularly to determine knowledge gained, skills acquired, practices changed, and other educational outcomes and impacts. Appropriate programs will be evaluated using National 4-H Common Measures or other statewide standardized indicators.
- Partnerships with other organizations that support the mission of 4-H Youth Development will be defined with common agreements delineating what each partner will contribute.
- Sharing expertise of limited faculty across county lines enables cross-training and minimizes the need for every 4-H agent to be an expert in everything.
- Optimizing the contribution of other Extension agents to ensure that their 4-H responsibility

matches Extension faculty members' expertise with the highest priority needs of the 4-H program.

- Participation in annual professional development is expected of IFAS Extension faculty and staff.

Implementation, Oversight, and Best Practices

To ensure that the guidelines in *Standards & Expectations* were consistently implemented, a series of goals, shown in Figure 3, was included in the document to provide guidance and oversight and encourage use of best practices. (Details of each goal are provided in the complete document.)

Figure 3.

Goals for Implementation, Oversight, and Best Practices

- A system of consistent oversight for ensuring these standards are met will be implemented.
- The major goal of state 4-H faculty and staff will be to provide leadership and direction for the 4-H Youth Development Program.
- The major goal of state 4-H programs and events will be to contribute to effective county 4-H programs by providing advanced opportunities for project learning and leadership development.
- All IFAS educational programs that involve minor youth will be labeled as 4-H Youth Development and comply with requirements for youth protection and reporting.
- 4-H Youth Development programs will make all reasonable efforts to follow best practices and offer programming that is consistent with its mission, goals, and values. For example, in support of Healthy Lifestyles, nutritious food choices will be provided at 4-H functions.
- *4-H Program Standards & Expectations* is intended to evolve over time. The most recent version can be found at <http://pdec.ifas.ufl.edu/roadmap> and <http://florida4h.org/programs/4HStandardsExpectations.pdf>.

Summary: Progress, Results, and Benefits

After more than a year of advance notice indicating a shift in statewide 4-H program emphasis, an official version of *Standards & Expectations* was released in fall 2013, in time for Extension 4-H faculty members to devise their plans of work for fiscal year (FY) 2014. Plans subsequently began to include many of the objectives from Initiative 7 of the *UF/IFAS Extension Roadmap* and reflect the guidance provided by *Standards & Expectations*. Examples of statewide results from the first 2 years began to reflect these implementation efforts, as indicated by the data shown in Table 1.

Table 1.

Key Enrollment Trends Reflecting New Standards and Expectations

Enrollment indicator	Trend: FY2011–FY2015
4 H club enrollment	Increased 18% to 23,155
Number of 4-H clubs	Increased 51% to 1,087
Youth participation in school enrichment	Decreased 9% to 150,924
4-H club enrollment as a percentage of total 4-H enrollment	Increased from 8.3% to 11.3%

As a significant example, data from FY2011 to FY2015 (Florida 4-H, 2015) indicate that a key goal to increase 4-H club enrollment and reduce focus on short-term programs such as school enrichment was beginning to be realized due to a statewide program focus leading to and resulting from the establishment of *Standards & Expectations*. Similarly, goals pertaining to volunteers, diversity, and so forth are also being addressed. Furthermore, evaluation results based on *4-H Common Measures* (Florida 4-H, 2014) reflect positive program outcomes that indicate the consequential benefit of program quality that may result from setting consistent program standards. (Examples include positive gains older 4-H youth attributed to their 4-H experience, but that is not the focus of this article.)

It is important to note that although these positive trends may be a testament to the establishment of consistent program standards and expectations, they depend on the dedicated efforts of the county, district, and state Extension/4-H faculty and staff who lead and deliver the 4-H youth development program with the help of trained volunteers. Lastly, a similar approach to developing common goals, standards, and expectations is likely to be useful to any Extension program or similar educational organization beyond 4-H, at state, district, or local levels. The example of program standard development provided in this article does not need to be replicated as is; instead, it is simply essential that everyone in the organization stay focused on whatever common goals are set. Therefore, a document such as *Standards & Expectations* becomes a fundamental tool for orientation of faculty/staff and volunteers as well as the basis for ongoing training and development.

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