

Making eXtreme Counselors: A State 4-H Camp Counselor Workshop

Abstract

Making eXtreme Counselors (MXC) is a statewide 4-H camp counselor training workshop. This training brings teens throughout Ohio together to help prepare them to serve as camp counselors in their own counties. Specific competencies are targeted each year on a rotational basis. The training allows youths to learn not only from a variety of 4-H professionals but also through peer-to-peer sharing and interactions. Evaluation results from participants and the professionals who work with them include high ratings of the program and positive comments. In addition, the results indicate that participants transfer their learning from the training to their performance as camp counselors.

Keywords: [camp counselor](#), [training](#), [competency](#), [camp](#)

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Rationale for a Statewide 4-H Camp Counselor Workshop

For most Ohio 4-H camps, teen camp counselors are crucial to the camp's success as they are responsible for planning, leading, and conducting the majority of the camp programs, under the supervision of a 4-H professional. Because of the critical role teen counselors play at 4-H camps, there is a need to provide camp counselor training experiences for them (Epley, Ferrari, & Cochran, 2017; Ferrari & McNeely, 2007; Galloway, Bourdeau, Arnold, & Nott, 2013; Garst & Johnson, 2005). These training experiences are designed to enhance counselor skills and occur at local, regional, and state levels.

The recommendation has been made that counselor training experiences should be focused on individual competencies (Epley, 2014), with these competencies comprising knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics associated with high performance (McClelland, 1973). Making eXtreme Counselors (MXC) is an annual statewide workshop in Ohio that focuses on these competencies and enhances the skills needed to be successful both as a camp counselor and in the workforce.

MXC Purpose

MXC brings together teens (aged 14 to 18) from across Ohio who plan to serve as 4-H camp counselors. As

indicated by Galloway et al. (2013), developing a camp staff training package that focuses on specific outcomes reaps benefits. The MXC training package provides prospective teen camp counselors with innovative ideas, information on camp counseling best practices, and new perspectives. Youths leave the workshop with skills that enable them to act as leaders in planning and teaching as well as in counseling for their county 4-H camps.

MXC Planning and Design

Each year's 2-day, 1-night weekend MXC is planned by a committee composed of cochairs and a group of 4-H professionals. These individuals plan the event through subcommittee responsibilities related to food procurement, marketing, scheduling, speakers, registration, and evaluation. The planning of each annual workshop is grounded in the overall design of MXC. In developing MXC, we applied intentional design to multiple aspects of the event, including the program schedule, relevant competencies, and keynote presenter. Overall, the workshop's design allows youths to individually dictate their learning experience while guaranteeing the expansion of their peer and professional connections and their knowledge base.

Program Schedule

We designed MXC so that from the moment participants arrive, they are building the experience they are learning from. The schedule, which begins with an opening early afternoon Saturday and ends mid-afternoon Sunday, includes traditional camp components (flags, songs, vespers, campfire, evening recreation, and closing) that are planned during the first session, which immediately follows the opening. In this session, participants work in small groups to plan activities they will then lead their peers through during the workshop. This planning session allows for peer idea sharing while empowering the teens to quickly develop connections and build identity within a group of strangers. The second day includes four pick-and-choose competency-based sessions, where each session includes six to seven class options all focused on one competency (see the "Competencies" subsection for further explanation). The competencies addressed on the second day change each year until all competencies have been taught (3–4 years).

Competencies

Fifteen competencies necessary in a successful camp counselor have been identified (Epley, 2014; Epley et al., 2017); see Table 1 for the competencies and their definitions. The competency-focused sessions at MXC are manifested in different ways depending on the teachers, activities, and applied discussions at various camp settings. Essentially, the six to seven class options for a particular competency equate to varied lessons individually developed or modified by the Extension professionals teaching them.

Table 1.

Ohio 4-H Camp Counselor Competency Model

Competency	Description
Child and adolescent development knowledge	Understands youths and their needs, along with the ages and stages of youth development; has an understanding of behavior management techniques and guidelines; puts knowledge into practice.

Communication	Communicates effectively with others using a variety of methods, including active listening, observation, direct conversation, and public speaking, in both individual and group settings; has conflict mediation skills.
Cultural awareness	Understands and accepts differences in others; appreciates different talents; relates to and connects with diverse groups of people, including those in various cultures, those with special needs, and those having varied backgrounds.
Health, wellness, and risk management	Is watchful and knows what to look for regarding potential health and safety concerns and how to deal with and react to situations; has knowledge of emergency procedures and the protocols to implement should an emergency arise; has knowledge of how to manage his or her own stress and support the physical and emotional well-being of the camp community and has basic first aid skills.
Personal commitment	Is committed to the philosophy and goals of camp and is devoted to the position of camp counselor; has a sense of selflessness; takes ownership of and has buy-in regarding the influence and impact he or she has on the program.
Professional development	Has a willingness to be coached and challenged; accepts feedback and guidance from adults and peers; seeks opportunities to continually improve knowledge, skills, and capabilities; develops job-seeking skills (including those associated with completing an application, providing references, and undergoing screening and selection processes).
Professionalism	Demonstrates behaviors that reflect high levels of maturity, responsibility, flexibility and adaptability, honesty, and trustworthiness; has an appropriate sense of humor; has a positive attitude; energetically shares knowledge; avoids a sense of entitlement; is engaged and respects people and things; demonstrates customer service and maintains confidentiality.
Program planning	Designs, creates, and plans appropriate programs and workshops to engage all participants; is prepared to implement these programs.
Role modeling	Is someone who others aspire to be like; models, demonstrates, and teaches positive values; has fun in a positive and responsible way.
Self-direction	Takes initiative and does things from start to finish with all the details and without being asked; works unsupervised;

	admits and recognizes mistakes he or she has made.
Supportive relationships	Is accepting and empathetic toward others, caring and kind, and responsive to needs; creates a welcoming environment and puts campers first.
Teaching and facilitating	Teaches and leads activities with ease; interacts with, engages, and motivates children; facilitates hands-on or experiential learning.
Teamwork and leadership	Effectively participates in and works as a member of a team; is supportive of peers and other staff; is approachable; has organizational skills and the ability to lead or follow and sees the "big picture" or goals of camp; understands and follows directions; can serve in a supervisory role.
Thinking and problem solving	Acquires information and uses thinking skills, including creativity and critical thinking, to prevent and solve problems; exercises fairness and moral integrity and makes sound judgments; anticipates consequences of actions.
Understanding of organizational and camp environment	Understands the 4-H organization and philosophy; has a sense of culture with the camping program; is knowledgeable about whatever content area (nature, technology, horse, etc.) is the focus of the camp; lives within the camp routine.

Keynote Presenter

The opening, the closing, and some evening recreation and competency-based sessions are taught by a keynote presenter. This invited presenter is an external resource person who brings ideas from outside of Extension, thereby broadening the scope of concepts shared at the workshop. Annual keynote presenters are encouraged to participate fully in the workshop, interacting with 4-H professionals and participants the entire time to promote sharing of ideas.

Evaluation

To gain a broad perspective of MXC, the planning committee implements two forms of evaluation.

Following the Event

All participants complete a short paper evaluation at the end of the weekend that includes questions regarding the quality of the sessions, guest speaker, and food. Participants also are asked about the impacts of the sessions they attended. They are asked about the skills they gained and whether those skills will help them complete their jobs as counselors. The 2017 MXC evaluation results indicated that 98% of participants perceived that they had acquired skills to become better camp counselors and that the skills they learned would help them in the future.

After Camping Season

Following the camping season, MXC participants and the state's 4-H professionals are asked to respond to an online questionnaire that addresses skills gained by the participants. In addition, the 4-H professionals share their perspectives about program implementation. According to the 2017 evaluation results, both participants and the 4-H professionals perceived that the participants were able to transfer learning from the state workshop to their county camp counseling experiences. The 4-H professionals also commented on how MXC participants stepped into leadership roles in county-level training and camp operations and indicated that they saw value in the workshop and would continue sending participants.

Conclusions

Based on the MXC participants' and 4-H professionals' positive comments and high ratings of the program, we believe we have found a format that works well in meeting teen camp counselor training needs. The participants in the workshop demonstrate transference of learning to performance as a camp counselor. The MXC workshop could be modified and implemented to train other 4-H camp counselors in other states.

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