Engage Stakeholders in Program Evaluation: Throw Them a Party!

Abstract

A data party is an engaging way to involve stakeholders in program evaluation. We explain the use of a data party for engaging 4-H program stakeholders (e.g., staff and volunteers) in data interpretation and helping them understand, embrace, and use program evaluation information to make data-driven decisions about their programs. We present two tools that can be used for presenting data in a clear and meaningful way: data place mats and gallery walks. We also provide information on the process we used, our lessons learned, and the utility of data parties in Extension programming.

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Kendra M. Lewis
4-H Academic
Coordinator for
Evaluation
University of California
Agriculture and
Natural Resources
Davis, California
kelew@ucdavis.edu
@ca4hresearch

Timothy Ewers
Extension 4-H Youth
Development
Specialist
University of Idaho
Moscow, Idaho
tewers@uidaho.edu

Marianne Bird
4-H Youth
Development Advisor
University of California
Cooperative Extension
Sacramento, California
mbird@ucanr.edu

Tamekia Wilkins
Youth, Families, and
Communities Data
Analyst
University of California
Agriculture and
Natural Resources
Davis, California
twilkins@ucanr.edu

Background

Engaging stakeholders in program evaluation can be difficult but is critical for rendering better and more useful evaluations. Program evaluation is too often a one-way flow of information. It is not commonly looped back into the program where stakeholders provide an "insider's insight" to evaluators about what the data may mean and where stakeholders can use evaluation feedback to improve programs.

A creative way to loop back and engage stakeholders in program evaluation is to hold a "data party" (Franz, 2013, 2018). This is a form of participatory evaluation (e.g., Bhattacharyya, Templin, Messer, & Chazdon, 2017) but is limited to stakeholder involvement in data analysis, review, and interpretation of study results. While participatory evaluation approaches are common in many areas of Extension, they are not as well employed within 4-H. We used data parties to develop a fuller interpretation of program data and promote more engagement in program evaluation with 4-H stakeholders. We focused specifically on the data interpretation phase of evaluation (for data analysis examples, see Franz, 2013, 2018).

Data Party Structure

We used multiple data parties to engage California 4-H Youth Development Program stakeholders in the practice of interpreting program evaluation results. The data were from studies on two topics: overnight camping programs and program participant retention.

For the research on evaluation of overnight camping programs (Lewis, Bird et al., 2018), we conducted data parties following the 2016, 2017, and 2018 camp seasons. The data parties included members of the California 4-H Camp Advisory Committee, county-based 4-H staff, and youth and adult camp volunteers. The content of each data party focused on previous-year statewide evaluation results. The objectives were for camp and county staff to learn about overnight camping program results from the overall state and to review results from their specific camps. We discussed the evaluation findings with the camp staff and the larger group to generate ideas for improving their camps in the upcoming year.

We conducted the second set of data parties using data from the Youth Retention Study (YRS) (Lewis, Ewers et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2016). The YRS assesses the experience of first-year 4-H club members to help evaluate where 4-H might strengthen its club program. At these data parties, we sought to engage 4-H staff and adult volunteers in exploring the data and gain their perspectives on the results and the study direction. In total, we held five YRS data parties in 2018 at regional conferences or trainings for Cooperative Extension staff and volunteers.

For both topics, at the start of each data party, we gave a brief review of the study details (location, who responded, how data were collected) as well as an introduction to the practice and expectations of a data party. We then led activities using two tools to present the data and facilitate discussions. During small-group and full-group discussions, we acted as guides, moderators, and prompters. Our role was to provide explanations of the data as needed, ensure that all participants' voices were shared, and prompt discussions when needed. Herein, we focus on the tools and associated processes we used during our data parties; Franz (2018) summarized best practices for implementing data parties that should be considered as well.

Tools for Sharing Data and Facilitating Discussion

We used two tools for presenting our data: data place mats (Pankaj & Emery, 2016) and a gallery walk of data posters (Titcomb, 2010). A data place mat includes a focused set of results and discussion prompts to aid in the interpretation of those results. A gallery walk consists of a series of posters that summarize findings (usually one finding per poster) and include discussion questions or prompts to facilitate discussion. Table 1 summarizes these tools and how they were used. Figure 1 shows a sample place mat from a camp data party, and Figure 2 shows a sample gallery walk poster from a YRS data party. At the end of each data party, participants created an action plan for program improvement. For example, the camp data party participants generated ideas for changes they planned to implement in their camps the following year. Figure 3 shows participants at a camp data party.

Table 1.
Data Party Tools

Tool	Format	Data presented	Process
Data place mat	• Paper (11×17 in.) with data presented	• Camp: Individualized camp/county-level	• Participants at the camp data parties had a small-group discussion with other staff in their respective

on both sides	data; one place mat presenting camper data, one place mat presenting data from teen staff	camps to discuss the implications of the findings. Participants were given time to review the place mats on their own before the full-group discussion.	

- Front side consisted of summaries of the descriptive statistics. We provided discussion questions as well as blank space for participants to take notes.

- YRS: National-level data focusing on youths' perspectives

- The full group assembled to discuss the implications and share ideas.

- Back side consisted of a word cloud (Henderson & Segal, 2013) or series of word clouds that represented frequencies of the response codes to open-ended questions.

Gallery walk

- 8 to 12 posters (approximately 24×36 in.)

- Each poster focused on one finding and included a set of prompting questions (e.g., "Does this surprise you?" or "What might this mean?").

- Camp: State-level data

- YRS: National-level data from all participating states

- Participants in groups of 2–3 walked around the room, reviewing and discussing the content.

- To ensure a balance of perspectives and discussion dynamics, we formed youth–adult pairs when youths were present.

- Staff and volunteers each paired up with someone from a different county or camp.

- Participants were asked to write questions or thoughts on self-stick notes and to stick the notes on the posters for group discussion.

- Following the gallery walk, the larger group assembled to discuss thoughts, questions, and interpretations that were generated during the gallery walk.

Figure 1.

Sample Data Place Mat (Front, Back)

County: **Source:** Camper

Participant Information

Data was collected from 104 participants. Take a few moments to reflect on this participant information. Jot down any thoughts or surprises that come to mind.

% Boys	42%
% Girls	58%
% "Yes", a member of a 4-H club back home	45%
% "Yes" plan to return to camp	85%
Average number of years at camp	1.98 (range= 1-8) yrs.
Average age	11.54 (range=9-16) yrs.
Average rating of camp*	9.01

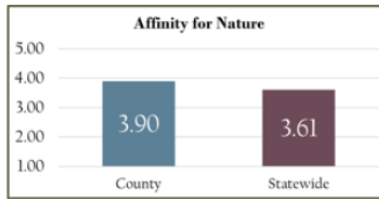*Scale from 1=worst time ever to 10=best time ever.

In earlier CA 4-H camp studies, we found that youth who rated camp higher had higher scores on the outcome scales. We used correlations to test the relationship between rating of camp and the outcomes. The correlations are in the table below.

Scale	Correlation
Nature	.53**
Responsibility	.43**
Friendship	.49**
Confidence	.33**

**p<.05; ***p<.001.

1. Does anything surprise you about these findings?

2. What might explain these findings?

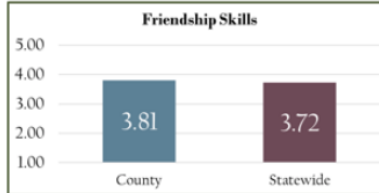3. Do you have any new questions as a result of these findings?

Affinity for Nature

County	Statewide
3.90	3.61

1. Does anything surprise you about these findings?

2. What might explain these findings?

3. Do you have any new questions as a result of these findings?

Responsibility

County	Statewide
3.70	3.46

1. Does anything surprise you about these findings?

2. What might explain these findings?

3. Do you have any new questions as a result of these findings?

Friendship Skills

County	Statewide
3.81	3.72

1. Does anything surprise you about these findings?

2. What might explain these findings?

3. Do you have any new questions as a result of these findings?

Confidence

County	Statewide
4.12	4.09

1. Does anything surprise you about these findings?

2. What might explain these findings?

3. Do you have any new questions as a result of these findings?

County: **Source:** Camper

The word clouds below show the categories that came up most often in response to the open-ended questions as coded by the State Office.

What was the best part of camp?

Everything Connection Communication Fun-in-the-forest Crafts Skits Friends Swim Games Activities Food Interaction Dance Fun Short-courses Arts Entertainment Hike Archery Outdoor Cooking Nature Staff Campfire

If you could change one thing about camp, what would make it better?

Nothing Noise Freedom Hikes Chores Food Snacks Free-time Shower Sit-with-friends safety Hike Everything Singing
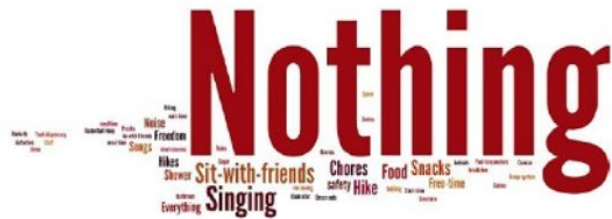
Figure 2.

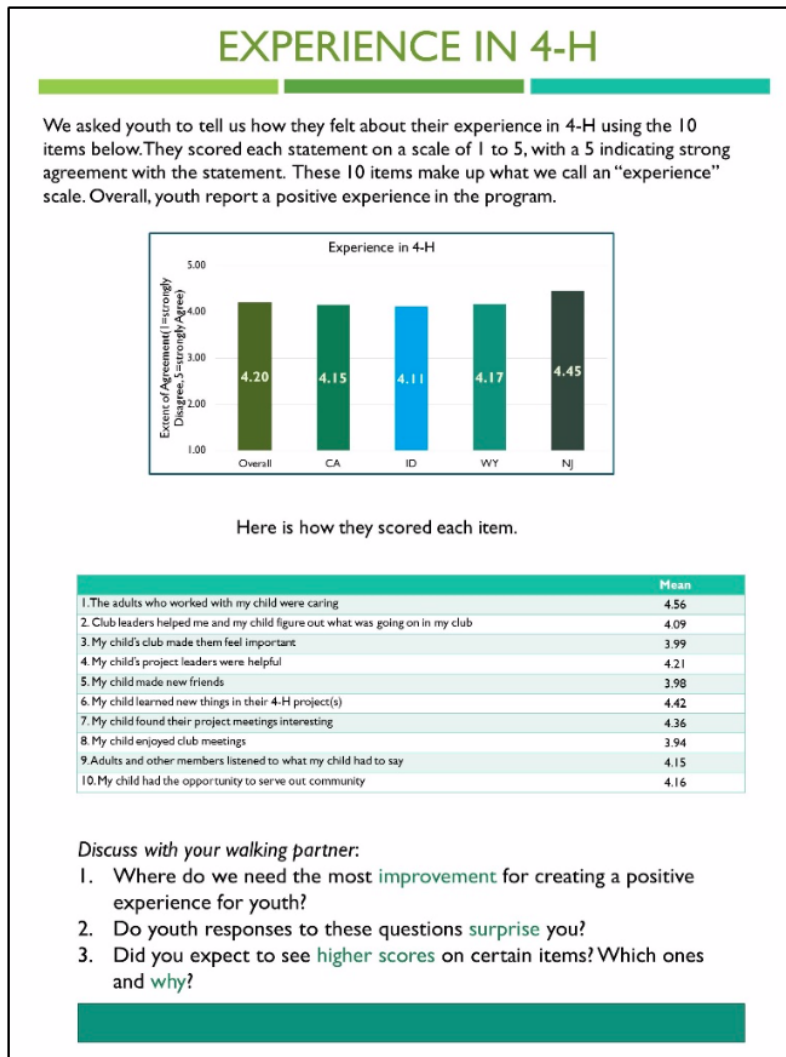Sample Gallery Walk Poster

Figure 3.

Participants at a Camp Data Party

Lessons Learned

Table 2 provides several suggestions for improving the data party participant experience. Other tips and suggestions can be found in the "Data Party Toolkit": http://4h.ucanr.edu/files/289885.pdf.

Table 2.

Lessons Learned

Portion of data party	Suggestions for an improved experience
Data place mat	• Include blank space on the place mat for participants to take notes.
	• Include small "thought bubbles" that explain statistical terms such as t-test, p-value, mean, and standard deviation.
Gallery walk	• Pair participants with people they do not normally see to help facilitate conversation and broaden perspectives of the data.
Overall data party	• Include action planning time at the end to ensure the data are utilized.
	• Leave time for breaks—data interpretation requires thought, and participants need time to process.
	• Make it a party. Have giveaways, party hats, and so on to help lighten the mood and lower any anxiety some participants may feel.

Conclusions

The 4-H experiential learning model involves three main components: do, reflect, and apply. Reflection is critical to advancing learning, and data parties create an opportunity for reflecting on evaluation data. Applying evaluation is not important only for youths learning through their projects; it is critical in the same iterative way for those developing and sustaining programs. Program evaluation utility is enhanced when evaluation information is integrated back into program development.

Our data parties helped participants understand, embrace, and use data by empowering them to do their own interpretation. Participants in turn became better equipped to make data-driven decisions about their programs. Participants also devised other ways to use data parties, such as with financial stakeholders, volunteers, or planning committees. We as researchers benefited by gaining new insights, from the practitioners' perspective, into the data. The data parties also gave us future directions in terms of analyses and next steps in our studies.

The following comments capture the general feedback from the participants:

> "I really enjoyed the gallery walk and listening to the Ah-Ha moments as people processed the information. The discussions were rich as the different people in my group saw where change could help their camps become a rich and safe experience for youth. I think a data party is a useful tool in helping camp professionals design an exemplary camp experience."

> "We will be having a [local] meeting to share the data, discussing our current policies and job descriptions and working toward making positive changes based on this information."

Data parties can help stakeholders develop appreciation for program evaluation and see evaluation as an integral part of their work and help researchers refine their instruments and develop more informed interpretations of data. The data party concept can be applied beyond 4-H or the program evaluation context —it is useful to any Extension professional interested in engaging stakeholders in dialogue about data.

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