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How Important Is Rigor? A State Specialist's Take on 4-H Project Work

Abstract

If 4-H'ers earn project recognition for things they do as a matter of course in their schools and with their families—things they would do whether or not they were 4-H members—then is 4-H really making a difference in their lives? I make a case for rigor and high expectations in 4-H project work and suggest that state Extension specialists, in their engagement in 4-H, have a unique opportunity to strengthen 4-H programming as a bridge to excellence in the academic and professional careers of its participants.

Keywords: [4-H project work](#), [state specialists' roles](#), [rigor in 4-H projects](#)

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For many years, solid project work based on the type of experiential topical learning described by Enfield (2001), Enfield, Schmitt-McQuitty, and Smith (2007), Kress (2006), and Bechtel, Ewing, Threeton, and Mincemoyer (2013) set 4-H apart from other youth groups. A few years ago, I lamented while judging consumer education project dossiers that the quality of project work had seemed to decline over the preceding several years. It seemed that rather than real project work, 4-H'ers were listing in their dossiers activities that were not directly related to the 4-H project, were passive on the part of the 4-H member, and showed little in-depth engagement in project learning. In other words, they were listing things they would have done as a matter of course in their lives whether or not they were in 4-H. Examples include courses or papers completed in school, sites or museums visited on family vacations, clothes shopping excursions carried out with friends, and even exhibitions visited at Disney World. Seeing these types of activities listed in 4-H dossiers that had made it through county competition to state-level judging caused me to wonder whether 4-H today is making a real difference in the lives of its members or 4-H members are just using activities they have done as a matter of course in their lives to obtain the scholarships and awards offered by 4-H and the organization's sponsors. It also started me thinking about what sets good 4-H project work apart from what I was seeing documented in the dossiers I was judging.

Any discussion of good project work brings a story to mind for me. It was 1974, and I was fresh from a master's program at the University of Georgia and beginning my first permanent job, as 4-H coordinator in Manatee

County, Florida. I had not been active in 4-H past sixth grade and had a lot to learn to provide effective leadership to a sizable county youth program that also engaged over 300 adult volunteers. Among the first home visits I made was one to a very active 4-H family living in a rural area of the county. Rob Babston, the second oldest of four siblings, was a high school sophomore whose project was poultry. His mother led me to the backyard to a small hexagonal henhouse Rob had designed and built himself from building supplies salvaged from a landfill on the family's property. Each section of the hexagon held a group of hens. At the center was a small office space where Rob kept records of the cholesterol content of the eggs from each group.

A few years prior, researchers had made the connection between high cholesterol and heart disease, and at the time, it was thought that dietary cholesterol was a major contributor to high levels of blood cholesterol. Eggs, a food that contains large amounts of cholesterol, were targeted as a dietary culprit causing arterial plaque. Rob had talked the staff of a local hospital into teaching him how to use their equipment to measure cholesterol content in the eggs produced by his hens. He had organized his flock according to the amounts of cholesterol in their eggs, with the idea of breeding a flock that would produce lower cholesterol eggs. Rob's project work earned him a trip to National 4-H Congress that year, and it made a deep impression on me. "If 4-H can inspire this sort of discovery and initiative in young people," I decided, "I'm committed to the program."

Thinking back on Rob Babston's project, I can identify several factors that set it apart—criteria that still distinguish an outstanding 4-H project today:

- *It involves real engagement and learning in the project.* As a state specialist, I hope I share an interest in and passion for my subject area with the 4-H'ers in the project, and that is what I want to read about in their portfolios. Leadership, citizenship, and community service may be icing on the cake, but good, solid discovery and learning of concepts related to my academic discipline is what I long to find in those portfolio pages.
- *It demonstrates personal initiative.* It is good to participate in a project activity that an agent, a 4-H leader, or a parent has organized, but the gold standard in project work is proactivity on the part of the 4-H'er rather than passive participation in something someone else has planned. Project objectives, conceived and written by the 4-H'er, set up the plan for learning, and participation in research and concrete learning activities solidly related to those objectives should follow.
- *It clearly indicates what learning has taken place.* Participation in competitions, activities, and events do not by themselves document learning. "I learned" summary statements that meet the objectives set by the 4-H'er for the project year do, and those statements need to be meaningful and complete.
- *It shows project growth from year to year.* Each year's learning objectives—set by the 4-H'er and guided by his or her personal interests—build on what was learned the year before. Each successive year's learning takes the 4-H'er into a deeper and broader understanding of the concepts related to one or more aspects of the project. Ideally, by the fifth or sixth year, a 4-H member should have enough knowledge and preparation in his or her project to seamlessly move into college research and independent study in a related discipline.

I recently googled Rob Babston, the 4-H'er whose poultry project research had so impressed me years ago. I learned—not surprisingly—that he had completed a PhD in chemistry and had worked as a senior researcher for a major chemical company. What I did not expect to find was an obituary notice; it said that Rob had died at the age of 31, after fighting AIDS courageously and openly. The obituary went on to mention some of his accomplishments (including visiting 18 countries in a trip around the world) and to say that Rob was not afraid of

dying but that he was afraid of being forgotten.

Well, Robbie Babston, I have not forgotten you. Over the 40-plus years that have passed since I toured your henhouse, I have judged many, many 4-H record books and portfolios. Each time I open one, yours is the standard by which it is judged. To this day, I look for—and try to inspire—in each 4-H'er I meet, a little of your intellectual curiosity and initiative. It is my vision that by the time a 4-H'er has spent 4 or 5 years in a project, he or she—like you—would have had these accomplishments:

- gained a broad understanding of the academic disciplines and occupational options related to the project,
- developed a vocabulary for in-depth discussion of related concepts,
- selected one or more of the general aspects of the project for more specialized study,
- acquired the ability to think about and discuss the project concepts analytically and critically,
- conducted simple research on project topics via appropriate sources and through basic applied projects, and
- started researching college majors that might prepare one for a career in a related field.

In obtaining permission to use the real name of a former 4-H'er, I contacted Rob's family and found that he became a national winner in the poultry project his senior year in high school. (His brother, Rick, was also a national winner, in wildlife and forestry; his sister JoAnn was a national winner in clothing; and his youngest sibling, Julie, in her sophomore year of high school became the first female athletic trainer in the state of Florida.) Rob's mother and 4-H leader said that through his 4-H project, Rob eventually did find that cholesterol could be lowered through selective breeding, a fact later confirmed by professional poultry researchers.

For more than a decade, researchers and policy makers have searched for ways to help young people more effectively transition from high school to college (Adelman, 2006; Hoffman, Vargas, Venezia, & Miller, 2007; Hughes & Karp, 2006). State Extension specialists are in a unique position to help 4-H'ers integrate the discovery and experiential learning 4-H offers with the disciplinary insight and research potential their college experiences and careers can offer. We can do this by developing curricula and programs that lead 4-H'ers to set and meet learning goals, think critically, speak the language of the discipline, and develop research skills (Spiegel et al., 2005). We can devise ways to make mentoring of 4-H'ers who excel in their projects sustained and systematic (Hamilton, 2012; Kirk & Day, 2011). We can work in tandem with project sponsors to make sure that awards and recognition programs have rigor, integrity, and transparency (Merryman, 2013). Finally, we can refuse to let mediocrity pass for excellence so that our members can exit 4-H with an accurate understanding of what it truly takes to succeed in academia and in the workplace (Nagaoka, Farrington, & Ehrlich, 2014; Schorr & Marchand, 2007).

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