

## **Idaho 4-H Teen Conference Engages Students in Going On to Higher Education**

### **Abstract**

The Idaho 4-H Teen Conference program provides youths with opportunities to develop leadership skills and confidence, explore options for after high school, and work with adults as partners. The conference has been modified to include subject matter and experiences that encourage teens to "go on" to postsecondary education. Recent evaluations of participants show that the changes emphasizing choices after high school have been well received by attendees. Teen Conference is a premier teen event of the Idaho 4-H Youth Development Program, and conference planners continue to adjust its focus to ensure that it will meet the needs of Idaho teens well into the 21st century.

**Keywords:** [postsecondary education](#), [4-H teen programming](#), [teen conference](#), [teens go on](#)

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## **Introduction**

Studies have shown that in the near future nearly 60%–70% of Idaho jobs will require postsecondary education of some kind (Walters, 2015) Yet in recent years Idaho has ranked in the bottom of the nation regarding the national "go on" rate, meaning that a significant number of Idaho high school graduates are not going on to postsecondary education (National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, 2015).

Many factors influence high school students' decisions about attending college (Torres, 2007). Reasons for not going on include lack of affordability, lack of family members with positive college experiences, lack of knowledge about what major might lead to an appealing future career, lack of confidence about being successful in college or fitting into campus life, and lack of time for attending classes while juggling other responsibilities (College Atlas, 2017).

The Idaho 4-H Teen Conference (also referred to herein as "Teen Conference") has been a tradition for Idaho high-school-aged youths since 1923. This conference has given the state a platform for reaching any Idaho teen in a nonformal educational setting. In the last couple of years, it has become evident that traditional programs need to evolve to address emerging issues for youth. As a result of this need, Teen Conference has become focused on developing college- and career-readiness skills in attendees. Because the program is hosted on the University of Idaho campus, it provides teens an opportunity to experience college life by living on campus for

several days.

## Our Response

As members of the planning team for the 2014 and 2015 conferences, we saw an opportunity to showcase college programs while teens were on campus. Our planning team consisted of 4-H teen leaders and adults working together to identify activities intended to increase confidence, develop leadership skills, and allow youths to explore options after high school. Using university faculty and community networks, the conference provided participants a wide array of college degree and career exploration options. Workshop presenters were encouraged to develop their programs so that youths could get a taste of what they could do with a degree in the applicable field. Many youths participated in human anatomy classes that incorporated human cadavers, and others attended fashion design classes in which they learned how to design their own clothes and dye fabrics. By using this model, we provided participants the opportunity to connect with university faculty and students while exploring campus life.

In 2015, the planning team added two more aspects to the conference: (a) a college fair where participants could speak directly with college admission advisors and (b) in-depth education sessions. The in-depth education sessions included field trips to local businesses where participants could see firsthand real-life examples of what postsecondary education could do for them.

## Program Outcomes and Impacts

Our planning team conducted retrospective "post-then-pre" evaluations after the 2014 and 2015 conferences. A total of 155 youths responded to these surveys. In 2014, the responses to the survey indicated that only 59% of the youths felt they understood the options available to them after high school. This was increased to 75% in 2015, when the planning team added the college fair and in-depth education sessions.

Additionally, participants were asked to indicate their feelings before and after attending Teen Conference with regard to being able to work successfully with adults and thinking about what they might do when they got older. Results shown in Table 1 indicate significance at the .01 level for three of the four measures. These results suggest that participants are gaining the ability to more effectively work with adults and to consider a path to the future, both essential elements for helping youth become productive members of society (National 4-H Headquarters, 2011). We are especially encouraged that as a result of attending Teen Conference, participants were more motivated to think about their futures. By presenting learning opportunities that challenge them and familiarizing them with different types of employment, Teen Conference can provide youths with a greater understanding of their future career options (Ferry, 2006).

**Table 1.**

Retrospective "Post Then Pre" Results from Teen Conference Evaluations

| Item  | Year | No. of respondents | Before (M) | After (M) | p-value |
|---|------|--------------------|------------|-----------|---------|
| I can work successfully with adults           | 2014 | 44                 | 3.50       | 3.81      | .0002*  |
|   | 2015 | 111                | 3.41       | 3.54      | .07     |
| I think about what I might do when I am older | 2014 | 44                 | 3.55       | 3.93      | .0003*  |
|   | 2015 | 111                | 3.56       | 3.75      | .01*    |

\* $p < .01$

Our findings suggest that the current focus of providing engaging workshops related to careers after high school is an effective model. Teen Conference evaluation results have led to the recommendation that planning teams should continue to focus on options after high school. Future research administered several months postconference could be used for determining the lasting effects of college degree and career exploration on teens.

## Recommendations/Conclusions

Through presentation of the Teen Conference, the planning team has found a new and interesting way to introduce higher education to Idaho's youth. Participants can explore options for overcoming common barriers that prevent them from going on to postsecondary education. By using this opportunity to discover campus and college life while going to classes and workshops and exploring future degree programs or careers, they may see themselves as successful students in higher education settings. Also, the conference workshops focused on the cost of going on while helping students identify avenues for funding their college experience.

Providing participants opportunities to see themselves as agents of self-determination helps them develop the independence they need to further their education. Research has shown extended evidence that youths in 4-H are probably more likely to go to college than peers in other out-of-school-time programs because of increased access to knowledge and information (Lerner & Lerner, 2013). Holding the event on the University of Idaho campus provides participants with a short foray into a college experience, helping them envision their futures. It also introduces them to dormitory living, social events, and departmental faculty and staff in a safe way that permits an individual to strengthen the personal belief that he or she can be successful in higher education. This factor may be especially important in building confidence in students whose families have not experienced higher education.

As a centerpiece of the University of Idaho Extension 4-H Youth Development Program, Teen Conference is now well positioned to address the needs of Idaho's youth related to options for postsecondary education. Extension youth development teams elsewhere could apply similar approaches in their states.

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