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Life Skills Learned in 4-H: An Assessment in White Pine County

Loretta Singletary, Extension Educator, Central Area
Marilyn Smith, Northeast Area Youth Development Specialist
Robert Wilson, Extension Educator, Northeast Area

Introduction

As 4-H approaches its 100th birthday in 2002, land grant universities have an opportunity to reflect upon the role of 4-H in community-based youth development in the 21st century. As one of the first youth development clubs in the US, expectations for 4-H are high. Since 4-H has weathered the test of time, so to speak, it is likely considered a successful youth development program. The anniversary of 4-H provides Cooperative Extension an opportunity to objectively assess how successful 4-H is in reaching, teaching, and effectively developing youth.

In January 2001, University of Nevada Cooperative Extension designed and piloted a mail survey in Lyon County to assess the success of 4-H in youth development. The survey was implemented in other counties in Nevada, including White Pine County. Assessment at the county level is necessary because 4-H programs in Nevada are managed at the county level.

Designing and Conducting the Assessment

In designing a tool to assess 4-H, there are many models of youth development with which 4-H can be compared. One model that has been compared with 4-H is based upon six outcomes to expect from successful youth development. These outcomes are confidence, competence, caring, connection, contributing, and character.

Successful youth development helps children become: *confident* they can make a difference; *competent* through their ability, skills, and knowledge, and; able to work with people in a way that develops and promotes *caring* relationships. These youth *connect* beneficially with people and organizations, *contribute* their services to make a difference in their personal development as well as in their community, and demonstrate responsible and honest *character*, or a sense of who they are.

Another model for youth development programming focuses on "core concepts" established in 1990 by University of Nevada Cooperative Extension Youth Development staff. The core concepts provide a basis for

successful statewide youth development programs. Such programs produce youth who:

- ✓ learn and practice *self-responsibility and social responsibility* to feel accountable and in control of their lives;
- ✓ recognize when and how to *make informed decisions and implement decisions* to solve a problem or achieve goals;
- ✓ *communicate* effectively in both verbal and written form, to share thoughts and feelings which increase social competence, and;
- ✓ obtain career and occupational information to help *prepare for the world of work*.

Questions asked for this assessment are based partly upon the six descriptors discussed above and partly upon Nevada's "core concepts" for teaching life skills. Combining aspects of both models resulted in fifteen questions to assess how well 4-H is effectively teaching life skills to its members. Opportunity was provided for survey participants to comment about what they "like best", "like least", and "would like to change" about White Pine County 4-H.

Participants in the assessment included all adult volunteer 4-H leaders and the parents of all 4-H members currently enrolled in White Pine County. These participants were selected based on the rationale that 4-H leaders and parents of 4-Hers have the most frequent opportunity to observe any changes that occur among youth participating in 4-H programs.

Each individual was mailed a two-page questionnaire with instructions, and a self-addressed and stamped return envelope. Also included was a cover letter that explained the purpose of the survey, ensured confidentiality to participants, and thanked them for their participation. Of the 71 survey recipients, 22 returned completed questionnaires resulting in a 31 percent response rate.

Results of the Assessment

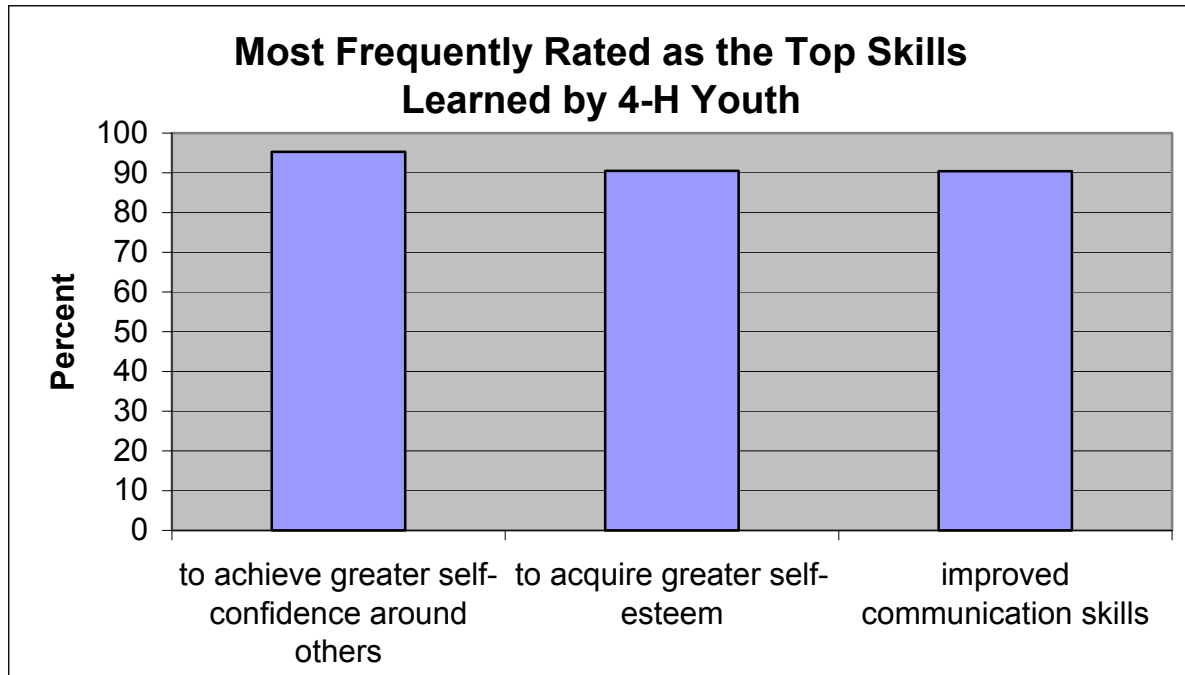
On a scale of 1 to 5 with "1" being "very little" and "5" being "very much," respondents were asked to circle the number that best indicates how much their child is learning as a result of 4-H. Respondents were given an opportunity to indicate that they "didn't know." The results were sorted into two groups by combining highest ratings into the top group and the lowest ratings into a second group.

The top life skills are those for which the majority of respondents had indicated their child had learned "much" or "very much." These are illustrated in Figure 1. Life skills for which the majority of respondents indicated that their child had learned "little" or "very little" were combined into a second group illustrated in Figure 2. The individual questions are listed below each bar graph to illustrate the percentage responses. According to the assessment results the top skill learned is: *to achieve greater self-confidence around others*. Other top rated skills are: *to acquire greater self-esteem and improve communication skills*. Assessment results indicate that life skills targeted for improvement in White Pine County 4-H include: *skills useful in dealing with conflicts and about future career choices*.

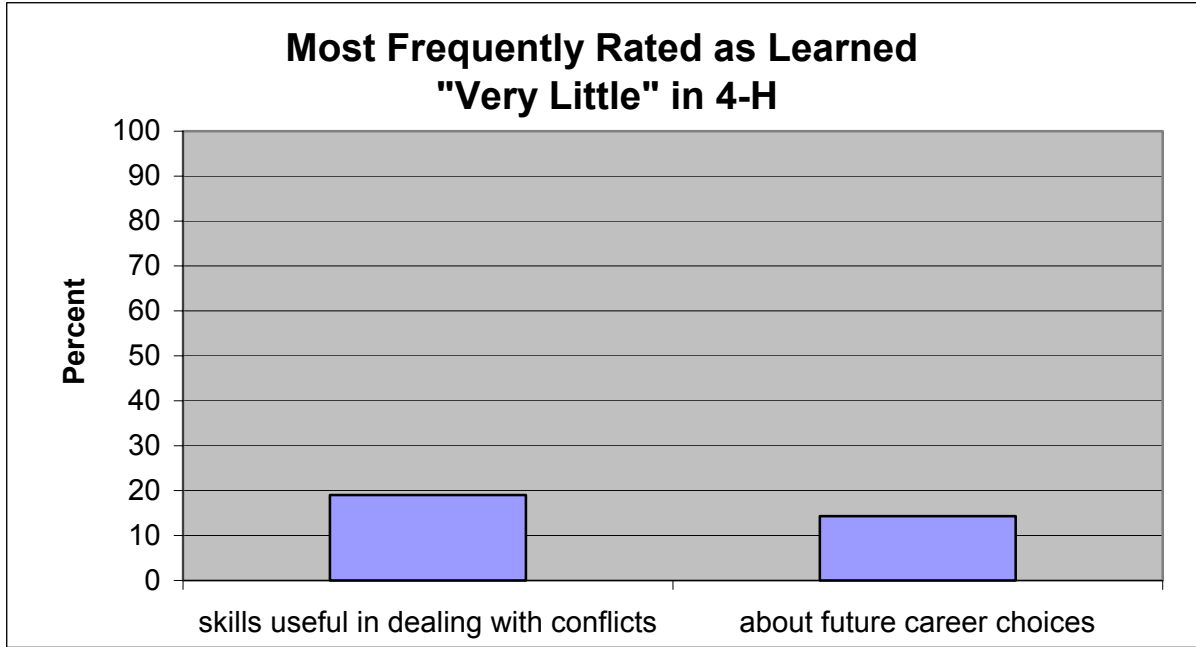
When asked "whose responsibility is it to see to it that your child gets the most out of 4-H", the majority of respondents (71%) indicated it is the parents' responsibility. Approximately 9% percent of the respondents believed the leaders were responsible for their child getting the most from 4-H.

In White Pine County, the majority of respondents indicated that they reside in a rural area(86%) followed by farm (10%). The majority (95%) indicated that they were white. Approximately 71 percent reported that as a child, s/he had been a member of 4-H, while 67 percent of the respondents had served as a volunteer 4-H leader. Of those respondents who served as a leader the average length of time served was 11 years.

Table 1
How much your child is learning as a result of 4-H



Percent indicating "much" or "very much"	Percent Much & Very Much
to achieve greater self-confidence around others	95
to acquire greater self-esteem	91
improved communication skills	90
relationship-building skills	81
improved organizational skills	81
improved public-speaking skills	81
knowledge about the project(s) in which s/he participates	81
to set and reach goals	81
improved skills to lead peers	76
to value service to the community	76
improved decision-making ability	72
self-responsibility	72
to trust others and be trustworthy	62
about future career choices	52
skills useful in dealing with conflicts	48



Percent indicating "little" or "very little"	Percent Little & <u>Very Little</u>
skills useful in dealing with conflicts	19
about future career choices	14

Selected Comments

With regards to teaching effectiveness, the following quotes indicate **what respondents liked best about 4-H**:

- *The opportunities my children are presented with which enhances life skills such as public speaking, conflict resolution, etc.*
- *Opportunities to learn and grow.*
- *The wide variety of interests, and the strong community service/involvement.*
- *Teaches responsibility.*
- *Experience children get.*
- *Opportunity to spend time with children with common interests.*

In contrast, quotes that indicate **what respondents liked least about 4-H** include:

- *Too much emphasis on winning the champion.*
- *Some parents do their children's projects--bad for everyone.*
- *There are not more kids participating.*
- *Lack of organization, favoritism, cliques that seem to be prevalent among leaders more so than the members. However, members take their cues from their leaders.*
- *Lack of children due to White Pine economy.*

When asked **if you could change anything about 4-H what would you change**, selected quotes include:

- *Record books.*
- *Politics.*
- *Parents attitudes.*
- *Ethical leadership , a more enthusiastic manner from leadership as opposed to a "good grief, we have to do it again", attitude.*
- *Not much - White Pine has an outstanding program compared to the rest of the state.*

Conclusions

To summarize, an assessment of 4-H life skills teaching effectiveness in White Pine County indicated that 4-H is strong in teaching youth to achieve greater self-confidence around others, to acquire greater self-esteem and to improve communication skills. Life skills that need attention include skills useful in dealing with conflicts and about future career choices.

Volunteer leaders and 4-H parents indicate that there are many aspects about 4-H that are well liked including, the opportunities that children are presented with which enhances life skills such as public speaking and conflict resolution, and 4-H provides opportunities for children that otherwise would not be available. Changes that 4-H should investigate include increasing parent participation, ethical leadership and more emphasis on the immediate learning taking place from the projects as youth learn them.

A statistical test for content validity and reliability of the pilot questionnaire was very high (.74). This indicates the questionnaire is a reliable assessment tool. Efforts are currently underway to replicate this assessment using this same questionnaire in other counties in Nevada. Once additional data are gathered, Cooperative Extension can further assess 4-H programs'

effectiveness, including for example, recognizing similarities or differences between urban and rural counties for life skills learned and changes needed. Any changes contemplated for the 4-H program as a result of the assessment must be discussed thoroughly, involving 4-H staff statewide and at the county level. The results of county assessments can be used to begin this process in a positive, objective manner, and to brainstorm ways in which 4-H can *make the best better*.

References

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