Life Skills Learned in 4-H: 
An Assessment in Eureka County

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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 Eureka 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 Eureka 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 Eureka 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 75 survey recipients, 17 returned completed questionnaires resulting in a 23 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. These results are 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 skills learned are: relationship-building skills, to acquire greater self-esteem, and to achieve greater self-confidence around others. Other skills rated highly are: improved organizational skills, improved communication skills, improved public-speaking skills, knowledge about the project(s) in which s/he participates and to set and reach goals. Assessment results indicate that life skills targeted for improvement in Eureka County 4-H include: skills useful in dealing with conflicts and about future career choices.
Figure 1
How much your child is learning as a result of 4-H

Most Frequently Rated as the Top Skills
Learned by 4-H Youth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent indicating “much” or “very much”</th>
<th>Percent Much &amp; Very Much</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>relationship-building skills</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to acquire greater self-esteem</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to achieve greater self-confidence around others</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>improved organizational skills</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>improved communication skills</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>improved public-speaking skills</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>knowledge about the project(s) in which s/he participates</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to set and reach goals</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>improved decision-making ability</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>improved skills to lead peers</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to value service to the community</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>self-responsibility</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to trust others and be trustworthy</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>about future career choices</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>skills useful in dealing with conflicts</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When asked “whose responsibility is it to see to it that your child gets the most out of 4-H”, the majority of respondents (59%) indicated it is the parents' responsibility followed by child (12%). Approximately 6 percent of the respondents believed the community and the extension staff share equal responsibility for their child getting the most from 4-H.

In Eureka County, the majority of respondents indicated that they reside in a rural area (77%) followed by farm (18%). Approximately 6 percent consider themselves to be urban residents. The majority (82%) indicated that they were white. Approximately 35 percent reported that as a child, s/he had been a member of 4-H, while 65 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 2 years.
Selected Comments

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

- I like everything I’ve seen.
- I like most the contact with rural people and finding out that 4-H has so many projects outside of agriculture.
- Seeing the kids have a great time and learn responsibility.
- It helps children to learn.
- The enthusiasm the leaders put forth and the skills our children have learned.
- Relaxed, fun experiences.
- The opportunities it offers my child and skills obtained.

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

- We live too far away.
- The program is lacking community support as well as county funding for needed improvements.
- It only goes on for part of the year.
- Sometimes hectic - but worth it.

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

- More age-specific projects.
- Fairground improvements to make the fair run smoother.
- Funding to improve the opportunities to the kids.
- The record books seem to be very repetitive and could be organized better.
Conclusions

To summarize, an assessment of 4-H life skills teaching effectiveness in Eureka County indicated that 4-H is strong in teaching youth relationship building skills, to acquire greater self-esteem and to achieve greater self-confidence around others. 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 contact with rural people, finding out that 4-H has so many projects outside of agriculture, the enthusiasm the leaders put forth and the skills our children have learned. Structural changes that 4-H should investigate include more age-specific projects.

A statistical test for content validity and reliability of this questionnaire was surprisingly low compared with results in other counties where the survey has been replicated. The statistic may be low due to the fact that in Eureka county, 4-H membership includes a very large range of ages. Parents of pre-schoolers are likely to answer these questions much differently than parents of teenagers. The questionnaire is still considered 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

