

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

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Managing 4-H: What's Working and What's Not Based on a Lyon County Assessment

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Introduction

In 2002 4-H will celebrate its 100th birthday. From its humble birth in rural America through boys corn clubs and girls canning clubs, early 4-H programs emphasized agricultural science education. It was discovered that youth were more open to new ideas and provided a link between Land Grant research information and farm families. The Land-Grant universities also believed that 4-H could help interest rural youth in agriculture during the 19th century when they were migrating to cities to “escape the plow.”

Although agricultural science remains an important part of traditional programs, 4-H has broadened its educational scope to meet the interests of urban youth as well. It has evolved into a national and international youth development program. It strives to remain “child centered” in its approach to education and requires adult role modeling and involvement.

The centennial celebration is an opportunity for the Land Grant system to objectively assess how successful 4-H is today in reaching youth and making a positive difference in their lives. A critical component of a successful 4-H program is effective management. Management of 4-H programs involves communication, membership recruitment, recruitment and education of adult volunteer leaders, program design and coordination, and program evaluation.

In January 2001, University of Nevada Cooperative Extension designed and conducted a mail survey to assess how effectively 4-H is achieving its management goals. The survey was piloted in Lyon County. With 1,360 members, Lyon County has the largest 4-H enrollment in Nevada. Assessment at the county level is necessary as 4-H programs in Nevada are managed and changes are implemented at the county level.

Designing and Conducting the Assessment

The success of any 4-H program begins with the day-to-day management of 4-H at multiple levels. These levels include:

- ✓ Management of 4-H projects by adult volunteer leaders as trained and supervised by 4-H program staff;

- ✓ Management of community 4-H clubs by adult volunteer leaders who wish to play a role in shaping the direction of 4-H within the community; and
- ✓ Management of 4-H programs countywide through supervision by Cooperative Extension staff, including 4-H program officers and assistants, extension educators and administrators.

Management goals include membership recruitment as well as curriculum and program design, project variety and competitive events. Management also includes how Cooperative Extension staff communicates information to program participants and recruits, and prepares adult volunteer leaders to guide youth activities. Based upon this management approach, ten questions were developed to assess whether 4-H is meeting its management goals in order to positively impact youth development. Opportunity was given for survey participants to comment about what they “like best, like least” and “would like to change” about 4-H.

The questionnaire was sent to adult volunteer 4H leaders and the parents of youth enrolled in Lyon County 4-H. The survey participants were selected because leaders and parents have the greatest opportunity to observe the effects on youth of 4-H programs. Also, 4-H leaders are directly involved in achieving many 4-H management goals.

Each individual was sent 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 and thanked them for their participation. Of the 603 survey recipients, 90 returned completed questionnaires, resulting in a 17 percent response rate.

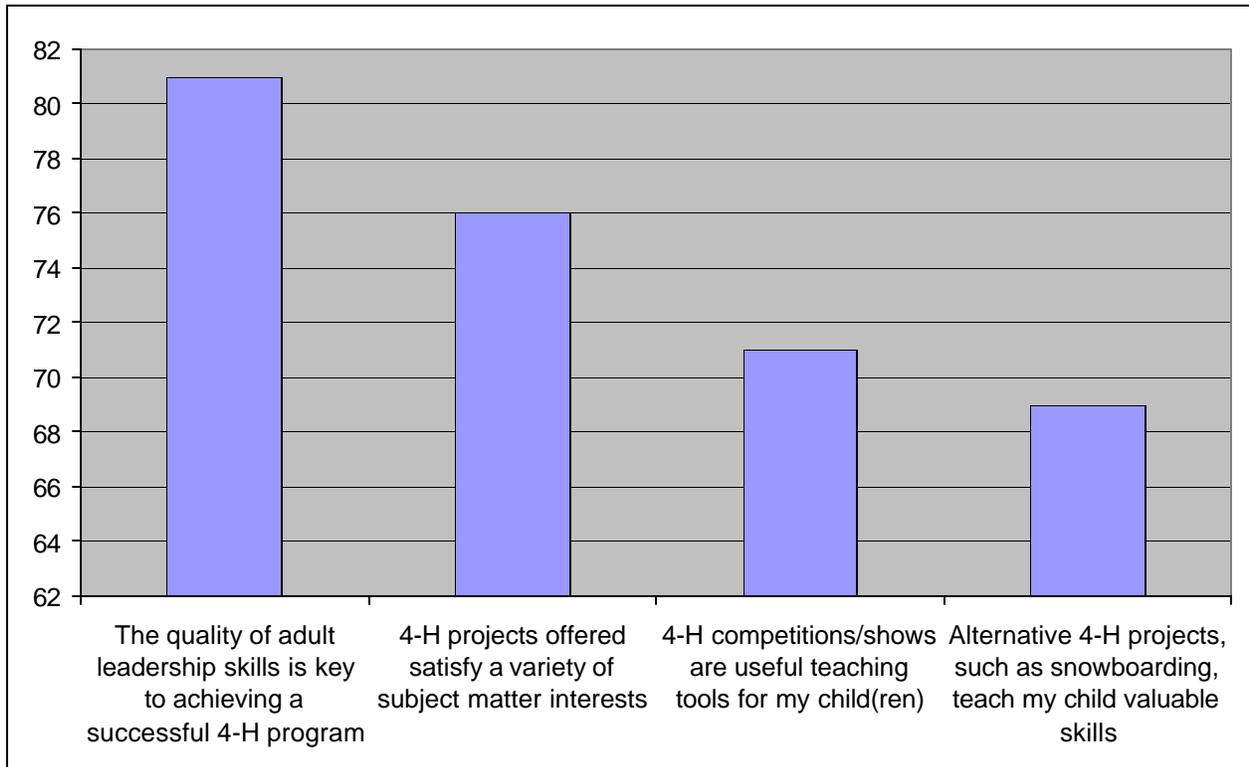
Results of the Assessment

On a scale of 1 to 5 with “1” being “ineffective” and “5” being “very effective,” respondents were asked to circle the number that best indicates how effective 4-H is in achieving its management goals. Respondents were given an opportunity to indicate they “didn’t know.” The results were sorted into two groups by combining the highest ratings into one group and the lowest ratings into a second group.

Management goals, as indicated by the majority of respondents as being effective and very effective, are illustrated in Table 1. Goals that the majority of respondents indicated that Lyon County 4H is “ineffective” and “very ineffective” are illustrated in Table 2. Ten questions are listed below each bar graph illustrating percentage responses for each question.

The management goal rated most frequently effective in Lyon County is *quality of adult leadership skills is the key to achieving a successful 4H program*. Also rated as effective management goals are: *4-H projects offered satisfy a variety of subject matter interests; 4H competitions/shows are useful teaching tools for my child, and; alternative 4H projects offered, such as snowboarding, teach my child valuable skills*. Management goals that were rated as either ineffective or very ineffective indicate goals that are not being adequately reached and need improvement. In Lyon County these include: *4-H newsletters are useful ways to teach and announce upcoming events; 4H attracts children from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds; volunteer leader training is adequate in providing the skills needed to lead projects and; Lyon County 4-H meets the changing needs of youth in Lyon County*.

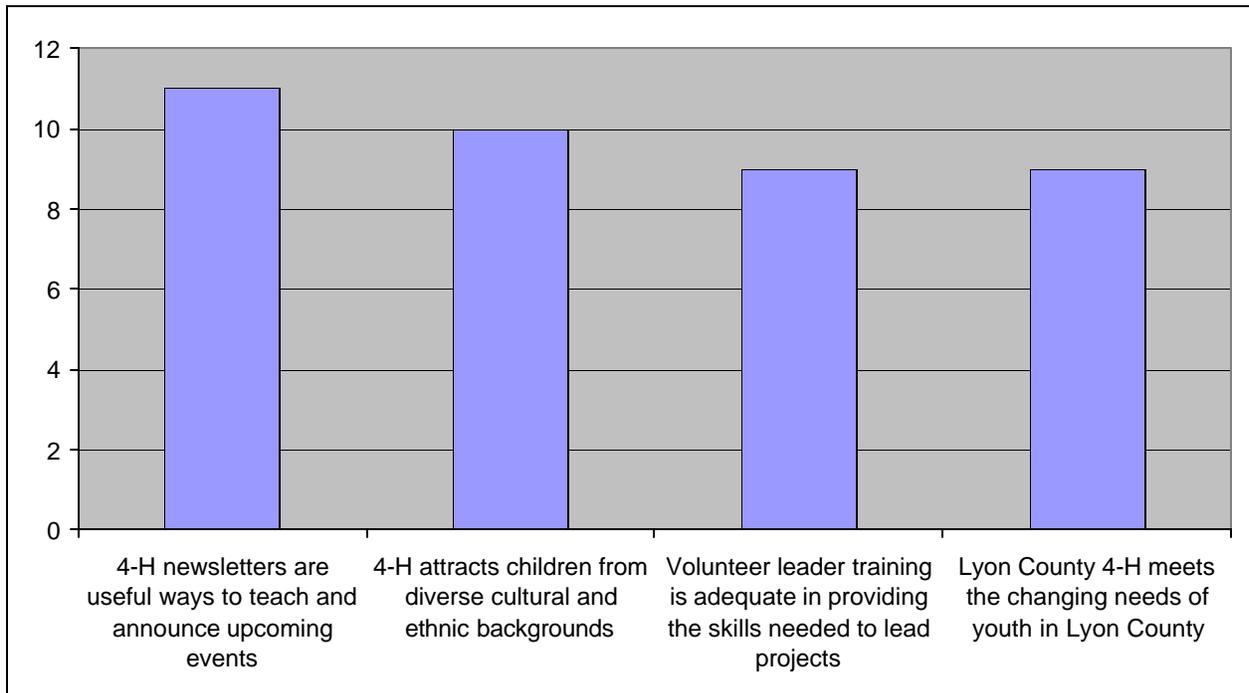
In Lyon County, the majority of respondents indicated they reside in a rural area (69%), followed by farm (23%) and urban (6%). The majority of respondents (89%) indicated they were white. Nearly half (41%) reported that as a child, s/he had participated in 4-H. Only 27 percent of the respondents *had never* served as a volunteer leader. Of the respondents who answered this question, the average length of time served as a volunteer 4-H leader was five years.



Percent indicating Lyon County 4-H has been "effective" or "highly effective"

Percent Effective & Very Effective

The quality of adult leadership skills is key to achieving a successful 4-H program	81
4-H projects offered satisfy a variety of subject matter interests	76
4-H competitions/shows are useful teaching tools for my child(ren)	71
Alternative 4-H projects, such as snowboarding, teach my child valuable skills	69
4-H record bookkeeping teaches valuable skills	64
4-H newsletters are useful ways to teach and announce upcoming events	64
Project materials my child receives help him/her gain knowledge and skills related to a project	63
4-H attracts children from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds	60
Volunteer leader training is adequate in providing the skills needed to lead projects	51



Percent indicating Lyon County 4-H has been "ineffective" or "highly ineffective"	Percent Ineffective & Very Ineffective
4-H newsletters are useful ways to teach and announce upcoming events	11
4-H attracts children from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds	10
Volunteer leader training is adequate in providing the skills needed to lead projects	9
Lyon County 4-H meets the changing needs of youth in Lyon County	9
Project materials my child receives help him/her to gain knowledge and skills related to a project	8
4-H record bookkeeping teaches valuable skills	7
4-H competitions/shows are useful teaching tools for my child(ren)	7
Alternative 4-H projects, such as snowboarding, teach my child valuable skills	6
4-H projects offered satisfy a variety of subject matter interests	2
The quality of adult leadership skills is key to achieving a successful 4-H program	0

Selected Survey Comments

With regards to management effectiveness, **what respondents liked best about 4-H** are illustrated by the following quotes:

- ✓ *Friendly, accommodating staff.*
- ✓ *My child has enjoyed the variety of things she has learned. There are some good leaders.*
- ✓ *The volunteer leaders I have known are excellent. They have worked hard to prepare interesting and educational programs and keep the children foremost in their goals and actions.*
- ✓ *I think there is a real team effort between leaders, parents and kids.*
- ✓ *Personal concern-very evident caring by leaders and office staff.*
- ✓ *The variety—if adult leaders are available to lead projects.*
- ✓ *It's family oriented. The volunteers are awesome to give up their time.*
- ✓ *The leaders and volunteers get the kids involved. It's not about the parents.*

In contrast, **what respondents liked least about 4-H** are:

- ✓ *Inadequate leadership to assist new leaders. I was never given much of any guidance on what to do as a leader.*
- ✓ *People (leaders) are partial to certain children.*
- ✓ *A lot of responsibility on the volunteer leaders.*
- ✓ *I was wondering if you screen your leaders. If not you need to.*
- ✓ *Facilities and lack of professionalism in some parts of the county.*
- ✓ *We're spread out geographically—50 miles to meeting—so don't go many times for county stuff.*
- ✓ *As a county we represent 4-H and this county cannot come together as one.*
- ✓ *Clubs don't work together—no community club.*
- ✓ *Record books—portfolios. Leaders are never very helpful and it is always a last minute rush. It's never done throughout the project.*
- ✓ *Unqualified or disinterested leaders. Leaders with negative attitudes and comments.*
- ✓ *Not well advertised—the sign-ups or diversity of programs.*
- ✓ *Not knowing about meetings.*
- ✓ *Too much competition--should be fun.*
- ✓ *Lack of communication.*

When asked “**if you could change anything about 4-H what would you change**” respondents indicated the following:

- ✓ *We need to learn to come together at higher levels to represent our county to the fullest.*
- ✓ *Provide more leader training--not something thrown together at the last minute.*

- ✓ *The level of expertise for livestock group leaders.*
- ✓ *A way to make sure everyone in the community knows about 4-H. Better advertising-- even posters or a local person advertising.*
- ✓ *More networking among leaders of the same projects in different geographical areas.*
- ✓ *Mandatory classes for leaders on how to teach and handle classroom situations, and classes on how to deal with children.*
- ✓ *Offer a larger variety of projects for teens (educational, contemporary).*

Conclusions

To summarize, a pilot assessment of the effectiveness of the management of Lyon County 4-H indicates that the quality of volunteer leadership is key to the success of the program. Also indicated as effective is the variety of projects offered, the teaching value of competitions and shows and alternative projects offered. However, there appears to be a critical need to target leader recruitment and screening as well as leader training to further strengthen Lyon County 4-H. Although the quality of adult leadership is rated as the key to successful 4-H programs, there is extensive concern about the level of leadership skills and abilities of these individuals to work well with children.

Additionally, respondents indicate that Cooperative Extension staff needs to encourage leaders countywide to network more, and to improve communication between staff and leaders and among leaders. County staff and leaders also need to advertise programs, sign-ups and other information more frequently and effectively. Although county staff has used newsletters in the past for this purpose, respondents indicated this management tool is not effective. The assessment indicates that 4H should strive harder to diversify its membership and meet the changing needs of youth in Lyon County. The assessment also suggested that 4-H projects be more diversified to satisfy contemporary interests of teens, for example.

A statistical test for content validity and reliability of the pilot questionnaire was very high (97%), indicating that the questionnaire is a reliable assessment tool. Efforts are currently underway to replicate this assessment using the same questionnaire in other counties in Nevada. Once additional data are gathered, Cooperative Extension will be able to further assess 4H program effectiveness. Any changes made to 4-H as a result of these assessments, however, must be discussed and carefully contemplated, involving 4-H staff statewide. The results of these assessments can be used to begin the process in an informed and positive manner.

References

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