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

Loretta Singletary, Extension Educator, Central Area
Marilyn Smith, Northeast Area Youth Development Specialist
Myrna Fisher, 4-H Program Assistant, Elko

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 is being implemented in other counties in Nevada, including Elko 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 Elko 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 Elko County. These participants were selected based on the rationale that 4H leaders and parents of 4Hers 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 225 survey recipients, 52 returned completed questionnaires resulting in a 23 percent response rate.

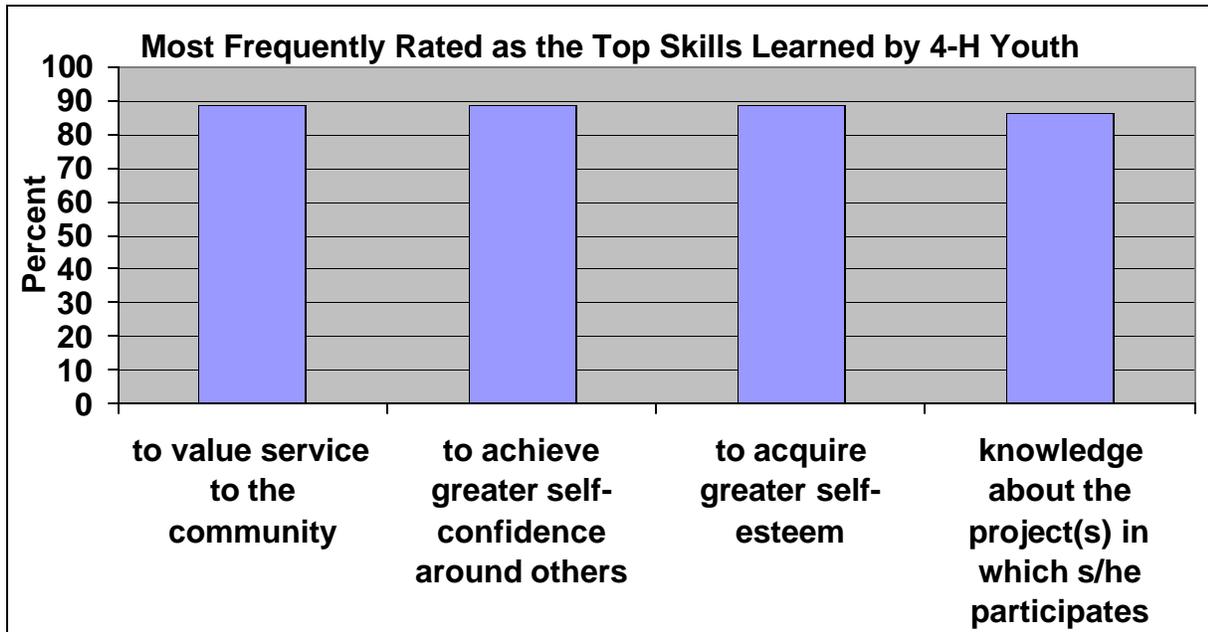
Results of the Assessment

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 illustrated in Figure 2. The fifteen individual questions are listed below each bar graph to illustrate the percentage responses for each question.

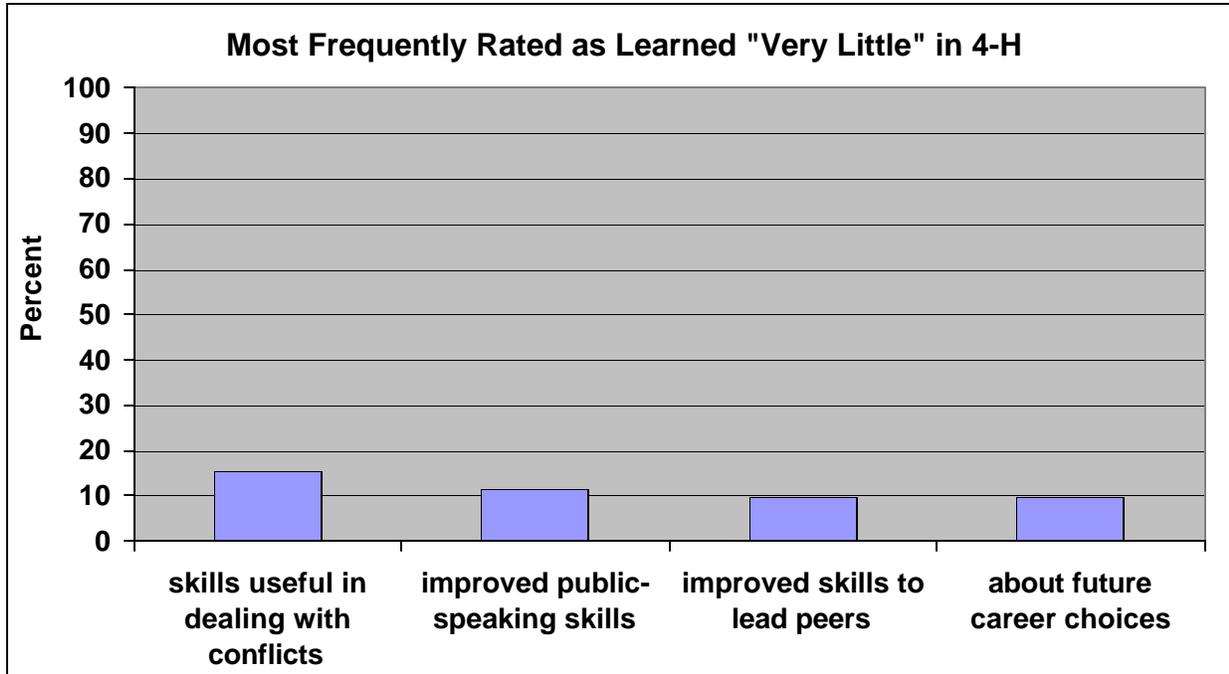
According to the assessment results the top skill learned is *to value service to the community*. Other top rated skills are: *to achieve greater self-confidence around others, to acquire greater self-esteem, and knowledge about the project(s) in which s/he participates*. Assessment results indicate that life skills targeted for improvement in Elko County 4-H include *skills useful in dealing with conflicts, improved public speaking skills, improved skills to lead peers, and about future career choices*.

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 value service to the community	89
to achieve greater self-confidence around others	88
to acquire greater self-esteem	88
knowledge about the project(s) in which s/he participates	87
improved communication skills	85
self-responsibility	85
improved decision-making ability	83
improved organizational skills	81
to set and reach goals	81
improved public-speaking skills	79
improved skills to lead peers	79
relationship-building skills	77
to trust others and be trustworthy	75
about future career choices	60
skills useful in dealing with conflicts	46

Table 2
How much your child is learning as a result of 4-H



Percent indicating "little" or "very little"	Percent Little & Very Little
skills useful in dealing with conflicts	15
improved public-speaking skills	12
improved skills to lead peers	10
about future career choices	10
improved communication skills	9
relationship-building skills	8
knowledge about the project(s) in which s/he participates	8
improved organizational skills	6
self-responsibility	6
to trust others and be trustworthy	6
to set and reach goals	6
to value service to the community	6
improved decision-making ability	4
to achieve greater self-confidence around others	4
to acquire greater self-esteem	2

When asked “whose responsibility is it to see to it that your child gets the most out of 4-H”, the majority of respondents (65%) indicated it is the parents’ responsibility followed by leaders (13%) and child (13%). Approximately 1.9 percent of the respondents believed the community was responsible for their child getting the most from 4-H.

In Elko County, the majority of respondents indicated that they reside in a rural area (56%) followed by farm (29%). Approximately 10 percent consider themselves to be urban residents. The majority (83%) indicated that they were white. Approximately 56% percent reported that as a child, s/he had been a member of 4-H, while 56 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 approximately 6 years.

Selected Comments

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

- *From healthy competition to public speaking, [4-H] prepares our children to be responsible, productive citizens.*
- *The companionship kids get from all types of children while they are learning life skills.*
- *That any child can participate – they can’t not be included because they aren’t good. Unlike sports – where you can be cut from a team if you aren’t considered good enough.*
- *Living in a rural area, your social participation is very limited. 4-H is a great way to be involved with other children.*
- *To be involved in a program that teaches responsibility, leadership, animal care taking and to be around positive role models.*
- *To take advantage of opportunities in learning new skills and socialization.*
- *Allowing members to make decisions and be involved in decision-making process.*

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

- *It depends upon who you are and not how good your project or project book is.*
- *I think the state office could improve the state contest; and also get information from the national level to the counties.*
- *Attendance requirements are very difficult for kids active in school and sports and church.*

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

- *That more children don’t know they can be involved without animal projects.*
- *More workshops for all projects besides agriculture based and shooting sports.*
- *To take advantage of opportunities in learning new skills and socialization.*

Conclusions

To summarize, an assessment of 4-H life skills teaching effectiveness in Elko County indicated that 4-H is strong in teaching value of service to the community. Life skills that need attention include skills useful in dealing with conflict.

Volunteer leaders and 4-H parents indicate that there are many aspects about 4-H that are well liked including, any child can participate. Structural changes that 4H should investigate include offering more workshops for all projects besides agricultural based and shooting sports.

A statistical test for content validity and reliability of the pilot questionnaire was very high (.92). 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 4H 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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