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Life Skills Learned in 4-H: An Assessment in Douglas 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 is being implemented in other counties in Nevada, including Douglas 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 Douglas 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 Douglas 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 190 survey recipients, 33 returned completed questionnaires resulting in a 17 percent response rate.

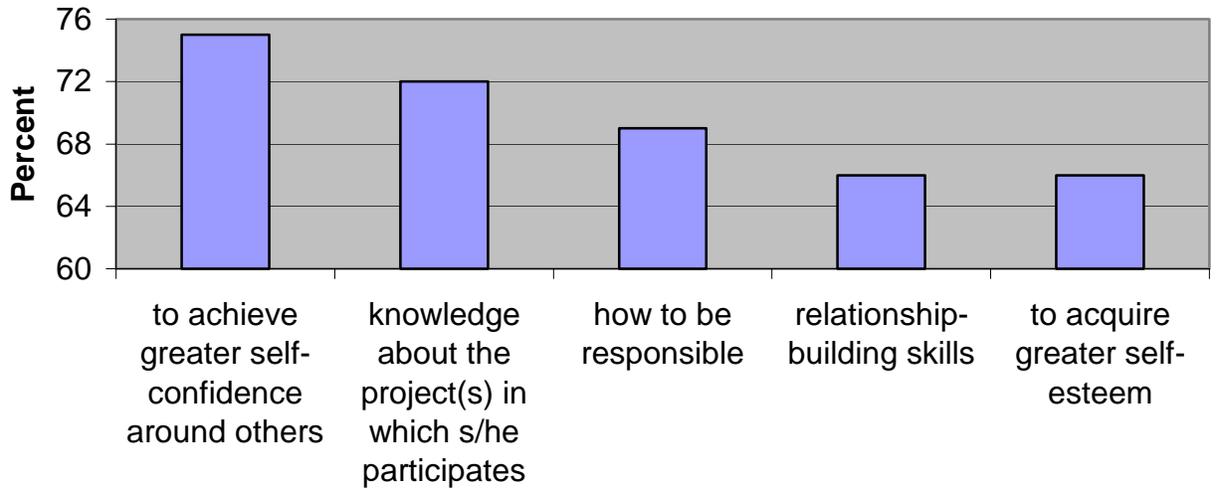
Results of the Assessment

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 fourteen individual skills 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 achieve greater self-confidence around others*. Other top rated skills are: *knowledge about project(s) in which s/he participates, how to be responsible, relationship-building skills, and to acquire greater self-esteem*. Assessment results indicate that life skills targeted for improvement in Douglas County 4-H include *future career choices, skills useful in dealing with conflicts, improved skills to lead peers, and improved organizational skills*.

Figure 1. Most Frequently Rated as the Top Skills Learned by 4-H Youth

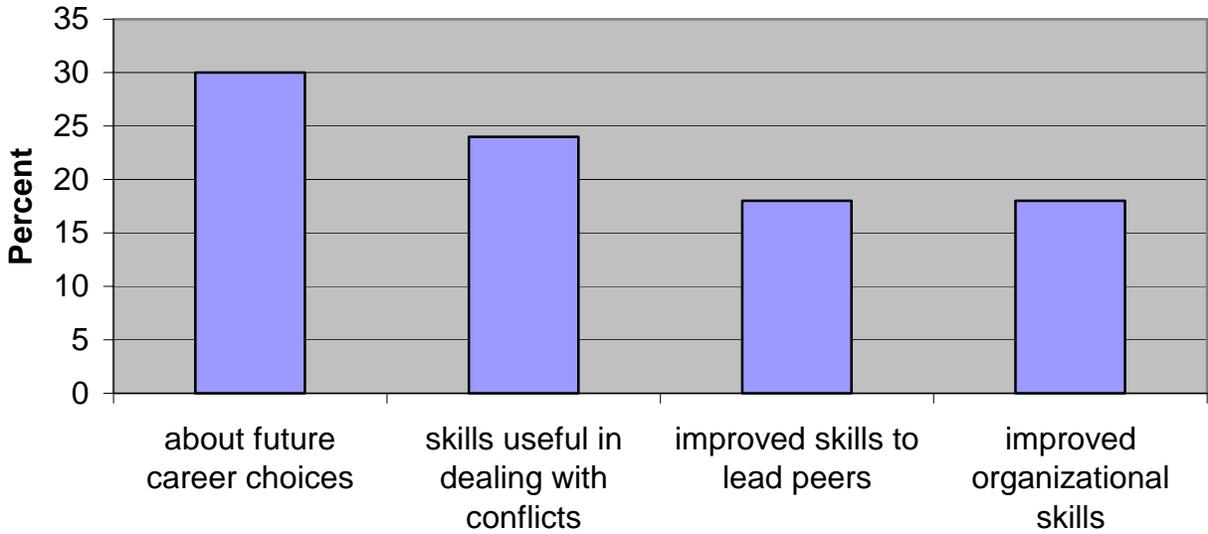


Percent indicating “much” or “very much”

**Percent
Much &
Very Much**

to achieve greater self-confidence around others	75
knowledge about the project(s) in which s/he participates	72
how to be responsible	69
relationship-building skills	66
to acquire greater self-esteem	66
improved communication skills	63
improved public speaking skills	63
improved skills to lead peers	63
to develop an increased interest in performing community service	60
how to build a greater sense of trust in others	57
improved decision-making ability	54
improved organizational skills	48
skills useful in dealing with conflicts	45
about future career choices	45

Figure 2. Most Frequently Rated as Learned "Very Little" in 4-H



Percent indicating "little" or "very little"

Percent Little & Very Little

about future career choices	30
skills useful in dealing with conflicts	24
improved skills to lead peers	18
improved organizational skills	18
improved communication skills	15
how to build a greater sense of trust in others	15
improved decision-making ability	15
how to be more responsible	12
improved public speaking skills	12
to develop an increased interest and appreciation in performing community service	12
to achieve greater self-confidence around others	9
knowledge about the project(s) in which s/he participates	9
relationship-building skills	9
to acquire greater self-esteem	9

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 child's responsibility followed by leaders (22%) and parents (19%).

- In Douglas County, the majority of respondents indicated that they reside in a rural area (76%) followed by urban (14%). Approximately 10 percent consider themselves to be farm residents. The majority (97%) indicated that they were white. Approximately 40 percent reported that as a child, s/he had been a member of 4-H, while 12 percent of the respondents had served as a volunteer 4-H leader. Of those who served as a leader, the average length of time served was 5 years.

Selected Survey Comments

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

- *“The leaders’ commitment to the kids, and their knowledge of what they are teaching.”*
- *“4-H is a wonderful program that promotes and encourages my kids to become responsible, caring individuals.”*
- *“Teaches good responsibility skills, good morals and good skills in interaction with others.”*
- *“I appreciate that although many events we do not attend, we are always invited and reminded.”*
- *“The group of parents that are involved in most of the events”*
- *“There are lots of events to participate in”*
- *“This is a wholesome club involving parents & children. It has kept a great line of communication between myself and my teenage daughter.”*
- *“Excellent leaders.”*
- *“My family roots, the beauty, the people.”*
- *“The variety of clubs offered, leadership.”*
- *“The Extension Office staff has consistently been friendly and helpful.”*

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

- *“The lack of volunteers for more groups.”*
- *“Not a lot of kids.”*
- *“Not enough on the calendar. Conflicts with other sports.”*
- *“No leader training, maybe we could have training sessions/positive reinforcement time for the 4-H leaders.”*
- *“It would be great if the results of horse shows, etc., were announced in the local newspaper. I rarely see 4-H mentioned.”*
- *“Record books too complicated for younger kids.”*
- *“The uniform but I know it is a big part of 4-H.”*
- *“Clicks among members.”*

- *Unorganized leader, lack of proficient leadership.”*
- *“All the problems and conflicts.”*

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

- *“I believe if you sign the code of conduct, you should have to abide by the rules.”*
- *“Teaching social skills.”*
- *“Have more club activities so students can meet each other.”*
- *“I would drop names off of the membership list if there was no participation by an individual for more than 6 months (to make room for others).”*
- *Add a couple more clubs, visit schools with 4-Hers to advertise 4-H to get more kids.”*
- *I know that leaders are hard to find but they are the ones that make or break up a 4-H group.”*
- *“I feel that special interests are met by individuals running the program.”*
- *“No leader training – maybe we could have training sessions/positive reinforcement time for the 4-H leaders.”*
- *“Portfolios.”*

Conclusions

To summarize, an assessment of 4-H life skills teaching effectiveness in Douglas County indicated that 4-H is strong in teaching youth 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 leaders’ commitment to the kids, and their knowledge of what they are teaching. Structural changes that 4-H should investigate include more volunteers for more groups and more leader training.

A statistical test for content validity and reliability of the pilot questionnaire was very high (99%). 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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