



COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

Bringing the University to You

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

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Introduction

4-H will celebrate its 100th birthday in 2002. From its humble birth in rural America through boys' corn clubs and girls' canning clubs, early 4-H programs emphasized education in agricultural science. 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 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, traditional, part of 4-H programs, 4-H has broadened its educational scope to meet the interests of non-agricultural youth. It has evolved into a national and international youth development program. It strives to remain "youth centered" in its approach to education, but requires involvement from adults, particularly as role models.

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

In January 2001, University of Nevada Cooperative Extension designed and tested a mail survey in Lyon County to assess how effectively 4-H is achieving its management goals. The survey was subsequently mailed throughout other counties in Nevada, including Humboldt County. An assessment of the 4-H program in Humboldt County is necessary because 4-H programs in Nevada are designed, managed, and evaluated at the county level.

Designing and Conducting the Assessment

The success of any 4-H program begins with its day-to-day management 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 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 recruiting members, designing curriculum and programs, and having an appropriate variety of projects and competitive events. Program management also includes how well Cooperative Extension communicates information to program recruits and participants, and prepares adult volunteer leaders to guide youth activities. Cooperative Extension developed ten questions to assess whether 4-H is meeting its management goal to positively impact youth. Each respondent was asked to rate how effectively the Humboldt County 4-H program was meeting its management goals, on a scale of 1 to 5, with "1" being "ineffective" and "5" being "very effective".

Respondents were given an opportunity to indicate they "didn't know", and were provided an opportunity to comment about what they "like best, like least" and "would like to change" about Humboldt County's 4-H program.

The two-page questionnaire was mailed to each adult volunteer 4-H leader, and to the parents of youth enrolled in Humboldt County's 4-H program. The survey participants were selected because leaders and parents have the best opportunity to observe if and how 4-H programs effect youth. Also, 4-H leaders are directly involved in achieving many 4-H management goals. All responses were anonymous, being returned to the Humboldt County Extension Educator in self-addressed stamped envelopes.

The results were sorted into four groups. The values "4" and "5" were combined into a category reflecting effective/very effective program management. The middle value "3" was interpreted to mean a neutral response. The values "2" and "1" were combined into a category reflecting ineffective/very ineffective program management. All "Don't Know" responses were classified as the fourth category.

Results of the Assessment

Cooperative Extension mailed 122 surveys, with 36 being returned, for a response rate of 29.5%. This is a relatively high response rate for an unsolicited survey. The average response rate is 10%.

All responses are shown in Figure 1. The values below the questions in Figure 1 reflect the question number on the survey form, and link data in the graph with the following text. Over 70% of respondents rated three program areas as effective/very effective. These program areas are:

- *the quality of adult leadership is key to a successful 4-H program (Q8);*
- *4-H competitions/shows are useful teaching tools (Q6); and*
- *newsletters are useful to teach and announce upcoming events (Q4).*

Four additional program areas were rated effective/very effective by over 50% of respondents. These include:

- *alternative 4-H projects teach my child valuable skills (Q7);*
- *4-H projects satisfy a variety of subject matter interests (Q1);*
- *record keeping books teach valuable skills (Q3) and*
- *project materials help my child gain knowledge and skills (Q2).*

Three program areas were rated effective/very effective by less than 50% of respondents. These were:

- *4-H attracts diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds (Q5);*
- *volunteer leader training is adequate in providing the skills needed to lead projects (Q9); and*
- *Humboldt County 4-H meets changing needs of youth in Humboldt County (Q10)*

Most program areas received neutral responses by between 20% and 43% of respondents. The only program area rated neutral more often than it was rated effective/very effective was *Humboldt County 4-H meets the changing needs of youth in Humboldt County (Q10)*.

None of the management goals were rated ineffective or very ineffective by more than 17% of respondents. Six of the management goals were rated ineffective/very ineffective by about 11% or fewer of the respondents. These were:

- *record book keeping teaches valuable skills (Q3),*
- *project materials help my child gain knowledge and skills (Q2);*
- *volunteer leader training is adequate in providing the skills needed to lead projects (Q9), and*
- *Humboldt County 4-H meets changing needs of youth in Humboldt County (Q10).*

Only two program areas had response rates for "Don't Know" above 10%. They were:

- *4-H attracts diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds (Q5), and*
- *volunteer leader training is adequate in providing the skills needed to lead projects (Q9).*

About 59% of respondents considered their child's level of activity and participation as high or very high, compared to other children in 4-H. Nearly 15% of respondents felt their child has low to very-low levels of participation. Almost all respondents felt that parents (47%) and adult leaders (38%) had primary responsibility for seeing that youth "get the most out of the 4-H program". Less than 3% of respondents felt the child, the community, or Cooperative Extension were responsible for ensuring that youth get the most from the 4-H program.

In Humboldt County, the majority of respondents indicated they reside in a rural area (57%), followed farm (31%) and urban (11%). The majority of respondents (88%) indicated they were caucasian. The rest were Hispanic. Approximately 47% percent reported that as a child, s/he had participated in 4-H, while 72% percent of the respondents had served as a volunteer leader. The average length of time served as a volunteer 4-H leader was 6 years.

Selected Written Comments Submitted by Survey Respondents

Written comments on the survey form were classified into several categories, depending on how they reflected management of the 4-H program, the teaching of life skills, or other unrelated aspects of the program. Some comments may be appropriate to both the management of the 4-H program and teaching life skills; therefore, the same comment may occur on both fact sheets. Comments listed below are those felt to reflect the management of the Humboldt County 4-H program.

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

- Small and friendly
- Learning to compete
- Selection of topics and qualified teachers
- Leaders and working with other leaders
- Provides our children with a sense of self-worth
- Extension staff's efforts to make it great
- The diverse projects available
- Great leaders
- Newsletter
- Family and community activities
- Leaders are excellent, very knowledgeable and dedicated

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

- Record books and associated paperwork
- Lack of organization, seems to be a problem keeping an agent that works for the community
- Politics, domination of ideas by one person at meetings
- Leaders need more support
- Everything seems last minute. Need more advanced notice and planning
- Not enough farm classes
- Too showy, not a backyard project anymore
- Lack of parent involvement
- No updates of information for leaders
- Not enough group meetings in McDermitt
- Parents and leaders inability to accept change and try new ideas
- Other parent interfering
- Extension staff (details not provided)

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

- Attitudes of adults toward extension agents or personnel
- More leaders

- Extension employee titles and personal goals have led to a lack of respect for youth and active parents
- Advertising in schools and community clubs in town
- Add another agent
- Lack of support from parents
- Need to get more people involved and interested.
- More information on what is available
- Be less competitive, and more newspaper coverage for participation
- Political agendas and office staff
- More meetings with leaders to keep them updated
- More meetings for kids

Conclusions

Data collected from both adult 4-H leaders and parents of 4-H youth show that most do not rate management goals associated with the 4-H program as ineffective or very ineffective. No more than 17% of the respondents rated any one management goal as ineffective/very ineffective. The quantitative data, however, indicate room for improvement in a variety of management areas, particularly when combined with the written comments.

The problem of highest concern is *meeting the changing needs of youth in Humboldt County* (Q10). The rating for ineffective/very ineffective was similar to many of the other management goals, but slightly over 50% of respondents had either a “neutral” response about this management goal, or “no opinion”. These data suggest that most adult volunteers and parents feel the current 4-H program does not *clearly* meet the changing needs of local youth. None of the written comments provided suggestions about what those specific needs are, or changes which should be made.

Most respondents feel *the quality of adult leadership is key to a successful 4-H program* (Q1). The survey results show that many respondents question *the adequacy of volunteer training* (Q9). Few respondents rated it as ineffective or very ineffective, but about 35% had no strong opinion. This suggests leadership training could be improved. Several written comments suggested more meetings with leaders could bolster their training.

Slightly over 50% of respondents felt that *project materials helped their child gain knowledge and skills* (Q2), and that *record keeping books teach valuable skills* (Q2). Both management goals, however, had a large number of “neutral” and/or “don’t know” responses. These results indicate that Cooperative Extension, adult leaders, and youth participants need to work together to re-evaluate the record book process and current project materials to find ways to ensure they teach important and relevant skills. Perhaps a comparison with programs considered *alternative 4-H projects* (Q7) is appropriate. Respondents rated the management goal, *alternative 4-H projects teach my child valuable skills* (Q7) much more effective. Also, this management goal had much lower rates for “neutral”, “ineffective/very ineffective”, and “don’t know”.

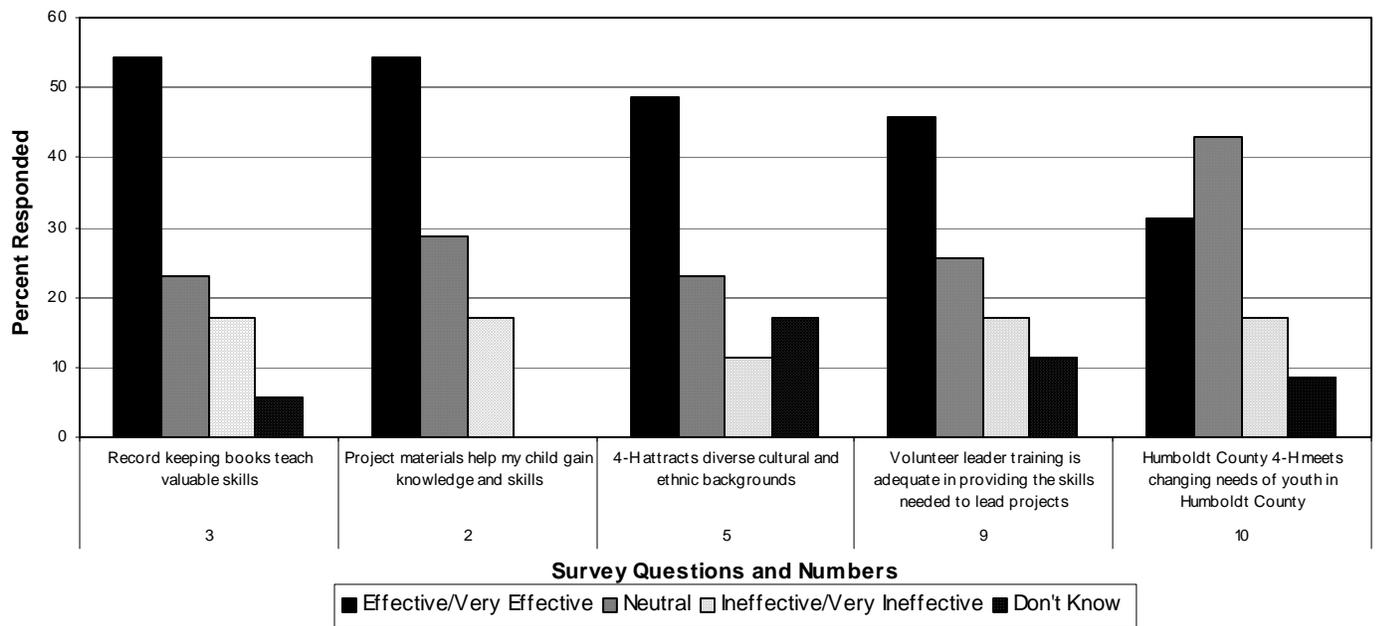
Respondents indicate there are few, if any, serious problems with *competitions and shows* (Q6), and *newsletters*. (Q4) Despite low response rates for “neutral” and “ineffective/very ineffective” the written comments indicate improvements may be possible for the newsletter. These include: earlier notification of deadlines and important dates, information updates for leaders, more information on what’s available. The written comments provided no responses about how to improve competitions and shows. This suggests the need for either a follow-up survey or a facilitated meeting to obtain input about how to improve these aspects of the 4-H program.

Efforts are underway to replicate this assessment throughout Nevada. This statewide information will help provide further understanding and help for managing the 4-H program in all counties.

References

- Andrews, N.S. and S. Russell. 2000. "Broadening the Perspective on Health and Youth Development," The Center. The University of Minnesota: Communication and Technology Services.
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Figure 1 (continued). Effectiveness of Humboldt County 4-H



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