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Life Skills Learned in 4-H: An Assessment in Carson City and Storey Counties

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Introduction

4-H celebrated its 100th birthday in 2002 providing land grant universities with 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 has since been implemented in twelve other counties in Nevada, including Carson City and Storey Counties. 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 Carson City and Storey Counties 4-H.

Participants in the assessment included all adult volunteer 4-H leaders and the parents of all 4-H members currently enrolled in Carson City and Storey Counties. 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 150 survey recipients, 33 returned completed questionnaires resulting in a 22 percent response rate.

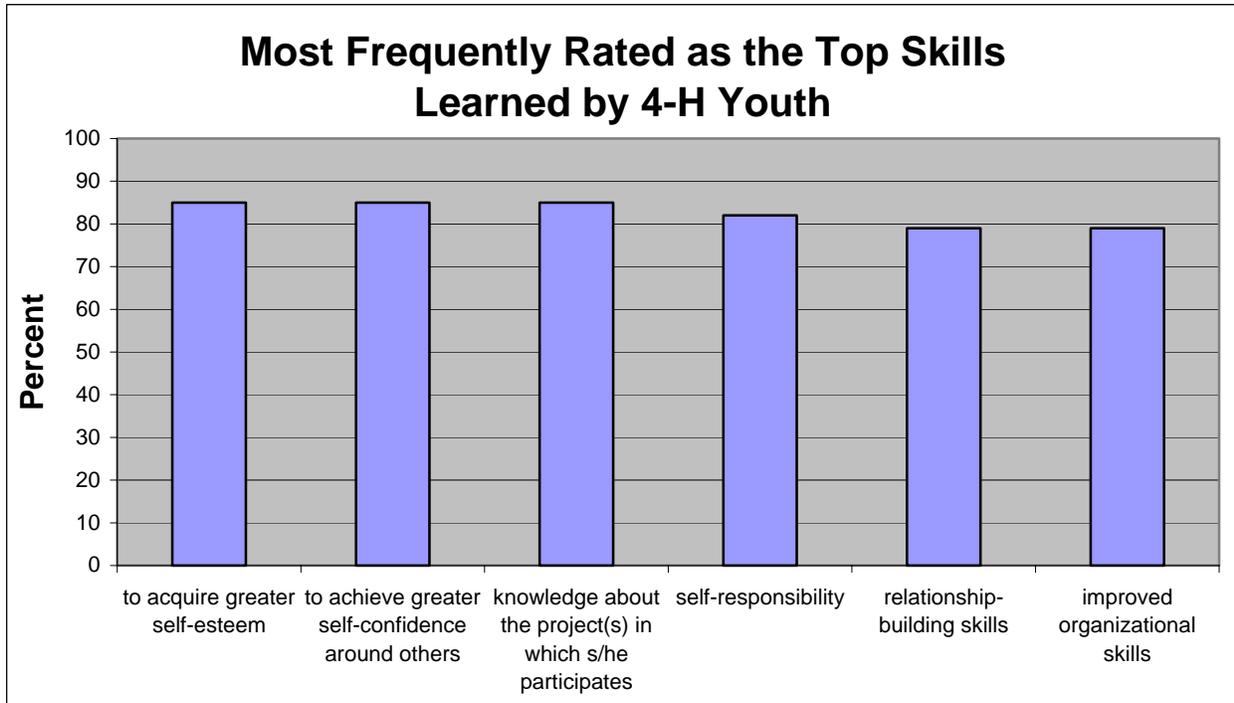
Results of the Assessment

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.

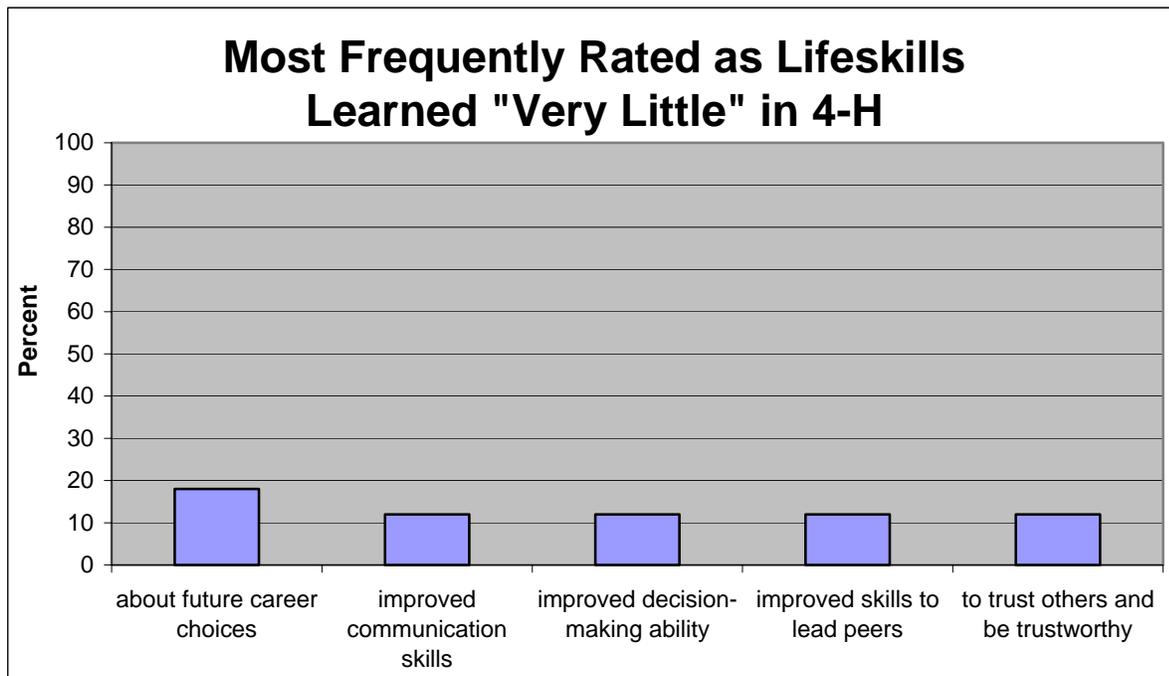
According to the assessment results the top skill learned is *to acquire greater self-esteem, to achieve greater self-confidence around others, and knowledge about the project(s) in which s/he participates*. Other top rated skills are: *self-responsibility, improved organizational skills, and relationship building skills*. Assessment results indicate that life skills targeted for improvement in Carson City and Storey County 4-H include *learning about future career choices, improved skills to lead peers, improved decision-making skills, improved communication skills, and to trust others and be trustworthy*.

Table 1
 How much your child is learning as a result of 4-H



Percent indicating "much" or "very much"	<u>Percent Indicating Much & Very much</u>
to acquire greater self-esteem	85
to achieve greater self-confidence around others	85
knowledge about the project(s) in which s/he participates	85
self-responsibility	82
relationship-building skills	79
improved organizational skills	79
to set and reach goals	76
to value service to the community	73
improved communication skills	70
improved decision-making ability	67
improved public-speaking skills	67
to trust others and be trustworthy	61
improved skills to lead peers	58
skills useful in dealing with conflicts	52
about future career choices	48

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



Percent indicating "little" or "very little"	Percent Little & Very Little
about future career choices	18
improved communication skills	12
improved decision-making ability	12
improved skills to lead peers	12
to trust others and be trustworthy	12
improved public-speaking skills	9
self-responsibility	9
skills useful in dealing with conflicts	6
improved organizational skills	6
knowledge about the project(s) in which s/he participates	6
to value service to the community	6
relationship-building skills	3
to achieve greater self-confidence around others	3
to set and reach goals	3

When asked “whose responsibility is it to see to it that your child gets the most out of 4-H”, the majority of respondents (30%) indicated it is the parents' responsibility followed by leaders (27%) and child (27%). Approximately 3 percent of the respondents believed the extension staff was responsible for their child getting the most from 4-H.

In Carson City and Storey County, the majority of respondents indicated that they reside in a rural area(61%) followed by urban (36%). The majority (85%) indicated that they were white. Approximately 27 percent reported that as a child, s/he had been a member of 4-H, while 67 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 1 to 3 years.

Selected Comments

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

- *"Community service encouragement"*
- *"Opportunity to participate in activities with values"*
- *"Opportunities for children to learn about themselves and animals - teaches responsibility"*
- *"My daughter has made many new friends in 4-H. She is not afraid to perform in public. 4-H has increased her self-esteem."*

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

- *"Portfolios"*
- *"Sometimes competing against friends is difficult for my child"*
- *"Not enough kids think 4-H is cool"*

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

- *"I would like more kids to be excited about 4-H and the possibilities for clubs"*
- *"More active participation in home arts program and fair exhibits shown"*
- *"Add a community club"*
- *"The children should have to do more community service projects as a group"*
- *"More and varied programs and clubs"*
- *"More leader training"*
- *"More pulic relations in schools and community"*
- *"Less rules"*
- *"Become a little more organized, or simply communicate better"*
- *"Update teaching materials, give leaders something to work with"*
- *"Planning"*

Conclusions

To summarize, an assessment of 4-H life skills teaching effectiveness in Carson City and Storey County indicated that 4-H is strong in teaching youth how to acquire greater self-esteem, how to achieve greater self-confidence around others and in providing knowledge about the project(s) in which youth participate. Life skills that need attention include learning about future career choices, improved skills to lead peers, improved decision-making skills, improved communication skills, and to trust others and be trustworthy.

Volunteer leaders and 4-H parents indicate that there are many aspects about 4-H that are well liked including, the community service encouragement, the opportunities to participate in activities with values, the opportunities to learn self-responsibility, and how 4-H increases self-esteem. Structural changes that 4-H should investigate include more leader training, public relations in schools and community, updated teaching materials and ways to make 4-H "cool" for more youth.

A statistical test for content validity and reliability of the pilot questionnaire was high (89%). 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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