

12-10-2021

## A Case of Shifting Focus Friction: Extension Directors and State 4-H Program Leaders' Perspectives on 4-H LGBTQ+ Inclusion

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### Recommended Citation

Elliott-Engel, J., Westfall-Rudd, D., Kaufman, E., Seibel, M., & Radhakrishna, R. (2021). A Case of Shifting Focus Friction: Extension Directors and State 4-H Program Leaders' Perspectives on 4-H LGBTQ+ Inclusion. *The Journal of Extension*, 59(4), Article 14. <https://doi.org/10.34068/joe.59.04.14>

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### **Cover Page Footnote**

Dr. Jeremy Elliott-Engel collected this data as a graduate student at Virginia Tech in the Agricultural, Leadership, and Community Education (ALCE) Department. The authors wish to thank and acknowledge Dr. Jeff Howard, Coordinator for Organization and Faculty Development, University of Maryland Extension, and to, Ashley Patricia Parra, Program Coordinator, Sr., State 4-H Office, University of Arizona Cooperative Extension for their expert review of this manuscript.

# A Case of Shifting Focus Friction: Extension Directors and State 4-H Program Leaders' Perspectives on 4-H LGBTQ+ Inclusion

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**Abstract.** Contemporary Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ+) youth are identifying and communicating their identities earlier in childhood than generations before as a result of more awareness and more acceptance of gender identity and sexual minorities by society. A qualitative study of U.S. 4-H program leaders and Extension directors generated an emergent theme around the importance of serving LGBT youth and the resulting implementation challenges. The administrators of 4-H, the largest youth serving organization in the country, recognize the presence of LGBTQ+ youth in 4-H and believe the organization must be inclusive. But challenges remain in ensuring youth experience inclusion at all levels of the organization and to manage political and societal pressures resulting from shifting focus friction.

## INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

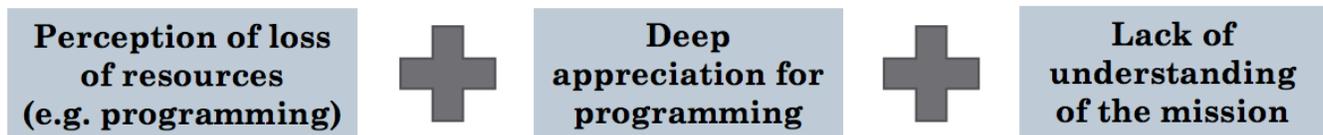
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ+) youth have emerged as a visible adolescent identity-based group in the United States, and contemporary youth are among the first to come out as LGBTQ+ in large numbers (Russell & Van Campen, 2011). Anti-LGBTQ+ harassment is a common experience for contemporary youth that is linked to significant health risks (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; D'Augelli, et al., 2002; Poteat & Espelage, 2007) including increased risk of being bullied, experiencing violence, and poorer mental health (CDC, 2017). Despite the increased health risks and the scale of the potential risk for this population, 4-H, like other youth organizations, does not yet have a framework for understanding, incorporating, and serving LGBTQ+ youth (Russell, 2002).

A preliminary investigation of a small sample of 4-H LGBTQ+ alumni found that youth did not perceive the 4-H organization as discriminatory. Yet, because of the grassroots nature of the organization, the 4-H club program reflects prevailing dominant cultural norms and attitudes in local communities (Elliott-Engel et al., 2019; Rand et al., 2021). A review of the literature found only limited publications on the topic of LGBTQ+ inclusion within Cooperative Extension, 4-H, or youth work in general. Myers (2008) provided a personal perspective of the stigma felt by lesbian, gay, and

bisexual colleagues within Extension and recognized that "it is a very uncomfortable subject for many" (pp. Abstract). Gonzalez et al. (2020) outlined an initial framework for LGBTQ+ inclusion practices for youth development professionals. The need for LGBTQ+ inclusion in the 4-H program was recognized by Ingram (2006) as well as Walter and Grant (2011). Soule (2019) introduced appropriate terminology and other basic information for Extension youth serving professionals in the *Journal of Human Sciences and Extension*. The *Journal of Youth Development* published four articles (Allen, 2014; Diaz & Kosciw, 2011; Lapointe et al., 2018; Regan et al., 2007) on LGBTQ+ youth development experiences in non-4-H contexts.

Yet, the need for LGBTQ+ inclusion in the 4-H program is increasingly recognized (Ingram 2006; Rand et al., 2021; Walter & Grant, 2011). Soule (2019) introduced appropriate terminology and other recommendations for how Extension professionals serving youth to create inclusive and welcoming environments. There is also a growing discourse on LGBTQ+ youth-development experiences in non-4-H contexts (e.g., Allen, 2014; Diaz & Kosciw, 2011; Lapointe, et al., 2018; Regan, et al., 2007).

Nevertheless, serving LGBTQ+ youth can be experienced as a culturally and politically risky decision (Payne & Smith, 2012). Shifting focus friction (SFF) is a behavior demonstrated by important stakeholders in the organization (Elliott-Engel,



**Figure 1.** Shifting focus friction. Reprinted from “State Administrators’ Perceptions of the Environmental Challenges of Cooperative Extension and the 4-H Program and Their Resulting Adaptive Leadership Behaviors” by Elliott-Engel, Doctoral dissertation. Copyright 2018 by VTechWorks.

2018), often in the form of backlash, when organizational changes cause the stakeholders to experience a loss of valued product or experience due to mismatched conceptions of the organization’s mission, see Figure 1 (Elliott-Engel, 2018). The stakeholders causing this friction are experiencing stress from a real or perceived loss brought about by a change in culture. Extension administrators have recognized that SFF is generated from a deep appreciation for the services provided by Extension paired with a lack of understanding about the organization’s larger mission, which causes the individuals demonstrating SFF to focus on preserving only the services they utilize and appreciate.

Established stakeholders, such as long-term volunteers, tend to resist organizational changes like the implementation of inclusive and welcoming programming for LGBTQ+ youth. Extension audiences with political power also use their relationships and connections to try to thwart shifts in the organization’s mission unless their special interest is maintained. Examples of responses administrators have observed include social media campaigns, personal attacks on administrators, and campaigns directed at legislators and university administrators (Elliott-Engel et al., 2021). Individuals within the organization who are non-adopters because they do not agree with the changes contribute to SFF.

The objective of this project is to share perspectives of state Extension directors and 4-H program leaders on serving LGBTQ+ youth in the traditional 4-H club program and the current status of the 4-H program in serving these audiences.

## METHODS

We designed a research project to explore the organizational environmental factors of Extension and the 4-H program. The topic of sexual and gender minority youth in 4-H emerged organically during this study (Elliott-Engel, 2018). The purpose of the larger study asks:

1. What environmental factors do Extension administrators perceive as being challenges for their Extension organization and the 4-H program?
2. How have Extension administrators responded to the organizational challenges they face?

## PARTICIPANTS AND DATA COLLECTION

We interviewed state Extension directors (n=7) and state 4-H program leaders (n=13) as part of this descriptive qualitative study. These participants were self-volunteers out of the 57 1862 land-grant university (LGU) institutions located in each state, U.S. territory, and the District of Columbia. The participants represent 15 states across all four Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities administrative regions. Because of the small number and public nature of our sample, we identify participants only by pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

Participants were asked to complete a management assessment tool called a strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat (SWOT) analysis for both Extension and the 4-H program in their state. The SWOT Analysis was a mental prompt prior to interview data collection. Participants were asked questions in one-on-one, semi-structured interviews about their perspectives on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in the organizations as well as about leadership behaviors needed to address the environmental factors they faced. Interviews were conducted and recorded using video conferencing software. The interviews ranged in length from 45-120 minutes long.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Audio data from the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Data analysis commenced when we sensitized ourselves to the data by reading all interviews. The data were line-by-line open coded using Atlas.ti. According to Charmaz (2014), open coding is the process the qualitative researcher uses to break manuscripts into individual concepts or meaning units and to assign meaning to each unit. Code names and code definitions are established and adapted as analysis occurs in an iterative process. Open codes are then grouped into themes. Throughout the data analysis we wrote memos (Charmaz, 2014) and used an iterative and constant comparative process. We also conducted member checking to ensure transparency (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Two populations were used to provide triangulation (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

# Extension Directors and State 4-H Program Leaders' Perspectives on 4-H LGBTQ+ Inclusion

## CONTEXT

It is important to note the context of data collection (May and June 2018). Guidance for 4-H LGBTQ+ inclusion (Soule, 2019) had been established at the state level, and an Extension peer-reviewed guide sheet affirming best practices for 4-H LGBTQ+ inclusion was placed on the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) website. Soon after, the guidance was removed from the USDA website (Crowder, 2019), and the administrator who approved its publication was reassigned to a new role. Around the same time, a State 4-H program leader was removed by their director of Extension in response to conservative political pushback from posting the same inclusion document (Clayworth, & Crowder, 2018). The removal was accompanied by public statements blaming the individual for posting the LGBTQ+ inclusion document outside the chain of command (Clayworth & Crowder, 2018). These events raised concerns about the political implications of such decisions for Extension administrators and brought the topic of LGBT youth inclusion to the forefront of participants' minds.

## RESULTS

All of the 20 administrators we interviewed recognized the presence of LGBTQ+ youth in their program. They considered the 4-H program to be inclusive from their perspectives, but administrators acknowledged challenges persist. They were navigating external political forces and pushback from front-line adults (both volunteers and professionals) throughout implementation. Above all, these administrators expressed organizational commitment to 4-H inclusion efforts for LGBTQ+ youth.

We have chosen to leave the way administrators referenced lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning individuals, and other sexual and gender identities intact to transparently reflect the administrators' discussion. We chose to use LGBT as the heading title because administrators consistently used lesbian, gay, and transgender terminology to refer to the population.

### LGBT YOUTH ARE MEMBERS

All administrators recognized the presence of LGBT youth in their programs. They discussed the challenges their organizations face in serving those youths, and several mentioned efforts they have undertaken to make LGBT youths feel welcome. "Ryan," a 4-H program leader, provided a representative example summarizing the effect on 4-H of societal shifts resulting from more youth starting to publicly identify as LGBT at earlier ages:

They've been part of the program since before [4-H] started. They haven't felt as comfortable coming out and saying that they are trans or bisexual, that they

[are] lesbian [or that] they [are] gay. They haven't felt comfortable saying it [but] now . . . people are more comfortable and it's more of a social topic.

### ADMINISTRATORS BELIEVE THE 4-H PROGRAM IS INCLUSIVE

Every administrator discussed the need to be inclusive and serve LGBT youth in the 4-H program. Eighteen administrators identified their organization as being inclusive. "Rhonda" shared that:

In terms of the whole discussion around LGBTQ [+] . . . I believe we have an open and inclusive organization. I believe we offer a place where young people can feel safe in that space.

Another state's 4-H program leader relayed successes in serving LGBTQ+ youth. "Callie" discussed that in her state's program:

[We have] a lot of transgender youth, which is awesome! With all our event planning, we've had to shift and change a lot in terms of how we do overnight accommodations and how we [provide] support to [transgender youth]. Bathrooms is . . . the easiest [aspect] of [planning]. It's the overnight pieces where [the individual is] in the process of transitioning [that is hard to navigate]. [We are experiencing] a demographic shift [where we now have] different types of sexual orientation [and] also gender identities [participating]. I think . . . it's interesting. We've almost placed [LGBTQ+ inclusion] higher than race and ethnicity.

Even though administrators saw their organizations as being inclusive to LGBTQ+ youth, they each continued to call for further work toward increasing inclusion.

### PUSHBACK TO INCLUSION

LGBTQ+ youth inclusion efforts have experienced pushback. In Susan's state, she was working on efforts to be more intentional about LGBTQ+ youth inclusion, saying, "we are trying to better serve the LGBTQ[+] community." However, she continued, "there's a lot of icky sticky stuff around that in the media and in our counties." Susan uses the words icky sticky to refer to the prejudicial comments and pushback to LGBTQ+ inclusion policy. "A couple of the states have put out [the USDA LGBTQ+ 4-H inclusion guidance]. [That guidance] turned out to be picked up by the press as being very, very negative," relayed Extension director "Timothy." This pushback has occurred from external actors, including the conservative media. Pushback was also experienced from internal membership, as Susan shared above. Ryan shared an illustrative anecdote:

We got a letter a month and a half ago from a parent whose children were not in 4-H yet. They were Clover Kid ages [ages 5 to 8] and [the parent] said that we are taking a radical social agenda and pushing it down everyone's throats. And their kids weren't going to be members of 4-H because, when the adult was in 4-H, that wasn't the case and they don't feel like it's right for everyone... She actually sent this letter to the President of the University, and of course it found its way back down to me for a response. I said "4-H is for everyone. We accept everyone, and we can make modifications and adjustments [to] make sure that everyone feels welcome."

This parent felt the organization had changed and was upset about how she understood 4-H was supporting LGBTQ+ inclusion efforts. With SFF, the feedback loop is not always direct; instead, it often draws in other levels of the organization, as in this case, the university administration.

Pushback against 4-H LGBTQ+ inclusion policy has not only been at the local level. "Curt" shared:

In the last month [USDA] has been censored regarding work with our vulnerable population groups. They're not allowed to speak to us about this. ECOP [Extension Committee on Organization and Policy] issued a national statement reaffirming the land-grant support of working with LGBTQ+[+] youth and understanding that. It's just this reality of [USDA]—our federal partner, who I believe is not demonstrating our civil rights statement or mission. We are trying to grow the program and include all children, and yet, [USDA] is not allowed to support that.

Curt's sentiment was echoed by other 4-H program leaders in his concern about the response at both the federal level (e.g. USDA) and at the local levels.

### COMMITMENT TO INCLUSION

Despite internal and external pushback, the administrators we interviewed remain committed to youth inclusion efforts. However, as "David" notes below, it takes leadership to remain committed to the goal in the face of pushback:

We see some of [that pushback] happening right now in Extension and 4-H in ways that are just very alarming and troubling. So that's where leadership has to be willing to step up and make it clear who we are and what our values are.

Even in the face of pushback, it was recognized the work is and must continue because LGBTQ+ youth and families are present in the communities that Extension and the 4-H

programs serve. As "Karen" went through a list of youth populations in the 4-H program she leads, she said in regards to improving inclusion efforts:

I think, from the point of view of LGBTQ+[+] [identifying individuals], one of the things that is on my radar [is] the work we've [started] doing . . . on a national level—try[ing] to be [both] proactive and responsive . . . to youth who are already members in our community.

Karen was reflecting on the establishment of 4-H LGBTQ+ inclusion guidance and also noting the advancements the 4-H movement is making towards inclusion efforts.

## DISCUSSION

Our findings indicate that administrators are facing challenges to ensure the 4-H program is inclusive of LGBTQ+ youth. Administrators recognized the societal shift of an increased presence of LGBTQ+ visibility because more youth are starting to publicly identify at earlier ages about their respective gender identities and sexual orientations. Administrators recognized LGBTQ+ youth were present in their programs and believed they should be made to feel welcome.

Administrators expressed great concern about the USDA's removal of 4-H LGBTQ+ inclusion guidance from their website and about the removal of a 4-H program leader. These significant responses to stakeholder pushback caused concern that there was not a will to uphold the commitment to inclusion. Administrators were worried that the message from above (LGU administration and the USDA) was that 4-H should not be inclusive. The resulting internal conflict left 4-H leaders grappling with their leadership strategy to ensure they were signaling commitment to LGBTQ+ youth without raising SFF.

Inclusion efforts have been inconsistently welcomed by constituents and Extension professionals. While administrators were explicit in their position of support of LGBTQ+ inclusion, SFF was experienced through pushback from local stakeholders (e.g., parents), the media, and even from the federal government. The threat of SFF did not have to emanate from an Extension administrator's state for them to take note of the potential risk. Even when SFF was not directly experienced by a state, the experiences of other states influenced administrator decision making.

Despite the internal and external pushback, state 4-H administrators remain committed to youth inclusion efforts. Even in the face of pushback, they recognize the need for inclusiveness because LGBTQ+ youth and families are present in the communities served by Extension and 4-H programs. Administrators positioned their support of LGBTQ+ inclusion less as a radical and performative

act of transformative leadership and more as a pragmatic commitment to serving all youth. Thus, acknowledging LGBTQ+ youth and families have been and continue to be in the program is an attempt to build shared understanding with current stakeholders.

Inclusion efforts in some instances have indeed welcomed and promoted more LGBTQ+ youth participation. In others, it has caused significant SFF. With the pushback, states and national leadership recognize that a need remains for the 4-H youth development organization to build a framework for how volunteers and members are prepared to support LGBTQ+ youth, including procedures for how to designate gender on enrollment forms, housing youth at overnight events, and other system level structures that may result in barriers to participation if not addressed.

## IMPLICATIONS

As organizational and youth development leaders at land-grant universities, the individual interviewed during this project recognize LGBTQ+ youths are in their programs, and they want to ensure support for those individuals. Furthermore, 4-H can help provide a positive youth development environment that reduces the risk of being bullied, experiencing violence, and poorer mental health for LGBTQ+ youth.

There are still individuals in communities across the country that remain uncomfortable with efforts for active inclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals in Extension and its 4-H programs. Thus, 4-H has found itself on a cultural fault line. The SFF experienced as a result of inclusion efforts has placed Extension and 4-H administrators in a precarious social and political situation. Nevertheless, administrators remain adamant that their role is to stay committed to inclusion, and they intend to continue to advance efforts in the short term for the long-term benefit of LGBTQ+ youth and their families.

To moderate SFF, administrators will need to focus on building a shared understanding of the objective of 4-H. The objective of the 4-H program is to create positive development opportunities for all youth. Administrators will need to navigate the perceived loss stakeholders may feel when the 4-H program emphasizes welcoming individuals from different backgrounds into the club or when the 4-H program shifts from a focus on project work to a youth-centered focus. The SFF framework gives Extension professionals at all levels of the organization a tool to build better communication and organizational strategies as Extension seeks to be more inclusive.

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