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Elizabeth Davis
Utah State University

Stacey S. MacArthur
Utah State University

GaeLynn Peterson
Utah State University

Vernon Parent
Utah State University

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Investing in 4-H Volunteers Through State Leadership Forums

Abstract

State volunteer forums can be an invaluable resource for providing opportunities for volunteer training on positive youth development. Some western states have experienced decreasing attendance and have questioned the practicality of hosting such forums. In this article, we showcase successes that one western state has experienced as a result of implementing innovative approaches. An online survey of participants showed increased capacity of volunteers to lead 4-H programs. Additionally, we outline implications for Extension professionals to inform their efforts to achieve successful volunteer forums.

Keywords: [volunteer](#), [4-H](#), [4-H training](#), [youth development](#), [forum](#)

Elizabeth Davis

Extension Assistant
Professor
elizabeth.davis@usu.edu

Stacey S. MacArthur

Extension Associate
Professor
stacey.macarthur@usu.edu
[@4Hvolpro](#)

GaeLynn Peterson

Extension Assistant
Professor
gaelynn.peterson@usu.edu

Vernon Parent

Extension Associate
Professor
vernon.parent@usu.edu

Utah State University
Logan, Utah

Introduction

Volunteer leadership development has been a fundamental objective of Cooperative Extension since its inception (Lockett & Boyd, 2012). This effort to increase volunteer leadership capacity in order to provide positive youth development is essential in any successful 4-H program but requires extensive time and resources (Culp, 2000). As a result, state volunteer forums need to show a good return on investment to justify their continuance.

In the West, many volunteer forums are struggling to retain participants. Some of the barriers include high cost of attendance, prohibitive length of the forum, inconvenient location, and irrelevant content (S. MacArthur, personal communication June, 22, 2017). As a result, six states no longer hold volunteer forums, three host them but need to make changes due to lagging attendance, and four are still progressing with such forums—including the one described in this article (S. MacArthur, personal communication June, 22, 2017). Trained 4-H volunteers are a vital part of a successful 4-H program; therefore, it is imperative that barriers to volunteer forums are addressed.

Program Description

Komives, Lucas, and McMahon (1998) noted that quality volunteer leadership involves elements of inclusiveness, empowerment, ethics, and purposefulness. To recruit, train, and retain committed 4-H volunteers who are

consistently building these elements of leadership identity and capacity, it is necessary to have sustainable and regular training programs that diminish barriers to participation. To meet this need in Utah, a multiday 4-H volunteer leadership forum is hosted annually by rotating counties, thereby ensuring that the forum is at some point conveniently located for anyone who wants to attend.

The forum includes general sessions, break-out sessions for which participants self-select into the session most salient to their interests and needs, a service project, and a recognition banquet. Examples of workshop topics include delivery of science, technology, engineering, and math concepts on a budget; ways to make food dehydrating interesting; development of a robotics and programming camp; 10-min leadership lessons; and biosecurity at horse shows. The wide range of relevant workshop topics and year-to-year variability promote leaders' staying current with trends in youth development and new technology. 4-H volunteers from across the state come together to receive professional development training, gain an appreciation for the *big picture* of state and national 4-H programs, acquire new ideas, connect with other volunteers and professional staff, and receive recognition for their efforts and dedication to 4-H.

To help reduce costs for volunteers and the time needed for participation, forum hosts minimize the number of days volunteers need to take off work by starting the forum on Thursday with optional events (e.g., mountain bike leader training) or tours unique to the county (e.g., petroglyph sightseeing). Then the general sessions, workshops, and recognition banquet are held on Friday and Saturday. If participants are unable to attend the entire conference, they may attend individual days.

Strategies for increasing participation include

- offering first-time-attendee fee waivers,
- incorporating a teen volunteer leadership track,
- using local business personnel and experts to teach workshops,
- providing opportunities for new staff to present workshops and network, and
- highlighting benefits of attendance through social media campaigns (e.g., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rMTdJ836lnk>).

In addition, conference hosts have responded to specific needs of participants. For example, participants in the shooting sports track (e.g., range officer safety and leader training) and livestock track reported that they did not want to attend a 3-day conference. This need was addressed by scheduling the programming for these tracks exclusively on Saturday.

Outcomes

Table 1 shows descriptive data for host county populations, attendance, and numbers of workshops offered for forums held 2012–2017. An institutional review board–approved survey was sent to all attendees after the 2014, 2016, and 2017 forums. The survey addressed changes in attendees' knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors.

Table 1.

Utah 4-H Volunteer Leadership Forum Descriptive Data

Year	Host county population	Attendance	Number of workshops offered
2012	115,958	304	97
2013	560,974	322	144
2014a	2,723	231	72
2015	1.1 million	268	121
2016a	95,110	265	86
2017a, b	7,025	255	60

aData were collected via surveys. bFirst year of condensed Saturday-only scheduling of livestock workshops.

Results of the surveys for the 2014, 2016, and 2017 forums showed that 99% of attendees learned something new, 98% of attendees would recommend the forum to others, 95% increased knowledge, 75% increased skills, 52% improved attitudes related to 4-H, and 14% changed their behavior. The results related to knowledge and skills are consistent with impacts from other 4-H volunteer training programs (Fox, Herbert, Martin, & Bairnsfather, 2009). Additionally, the survey included a section in which participants could write their own responses about outcomes of attending the conference. Respondents reported that they had implemented new programs, strengthened existing programs, improved 4-H environments, and benefited from networking opportunities.

Implications for Extension

Others in Extension interested in conducting a successful volunteer leadership forum should consider replicating or adapting the strategies described herein. Moreover, on the basis of our experiences, we offer some additional recommendations. The host should identify potential partners to support or enhance the quality of the workshops. Organizational strategies that improve efficiencies should be employed; such strategies include offering required certifications and trainings (e.g., shooting sports, horse judging) at the forum rather than offering them on a county basis. Additionally, it is important to be mindful of community and state events when scheduling such a forum.

Volunteers are a crucial part of Extension and 4-H programming. It is imperative to provide volunteers opportunities for training, collaboration, and empowerment. One way to build a strong volunteer base is by offering a leadership forum that is based on the varying needs of the volunteers and addresses potential barriers to participation.

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