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Straight from the Horse(man)'s Mouth: Innovative 4-H Camps

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Straight from the Horse(man)'s Mouth: Innovative 4-H Camps

Abstract

As 4-H evolves to include a wide breadth of youths' modern interests, innovative educational opportunities and evaluation practices become necessary. Horsemanship and safety-based horse camps were created in response to a statewide challenge to develop competitive 4-H members and retain those members as they approach adolescence. This article addresses the development, implementation, and review of Arkansas's horse 4-H camps. The article content includes a practical example of Kirkpatrick's evaluation model and a description of how a goal-based evaluation led to planned program modifications.

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Background

One in five Arkansas households owns at least one horse (University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture, 2016). In early spring 2016, Arkansas had 922 youths, aged 5–19, enrolled in horse 4-H projects; these participants comprised roughly 7% of the total population of enrolled 4-H members in the state (4-H Online, n.d.). Since 2010, the state 4-H horse show has become increasingly popular for youths (Russell, 2015), yet the horse 4-H program is facing the national battle of losing members as they approach adolescence (Defore, Fuhrman, Peake, & Duncan, 2011; Seevers & Graham, 2012). Currently, many members lack proper horsemanship, a situation that contributes to an overall frustration with horse projects, adding to the growing drop-out rate for horse 4-H clubs. In response to these issues, fee-based horse camps were developed via a statewide initiative (Cochran, Ferrari, & Arnett, 2014) and were specially designed by the state equine specialist to incorporate a wide breadth of resources and strategies. A spring break horse 4-H camp was first developed in 2010, and a growing participation rate necessitated the addition of a summer horse 4-H camp in 2013; both camps involve similar curricula and have been dually offered since 2013.

Purpose of the Camp

Goals of the horse 4-H camp include providing Arkansas horse 4-H club members with expert guidance and, ultimately, increasing members' desire to continue involvement with horse projects. The following objectives

guide camp activities:

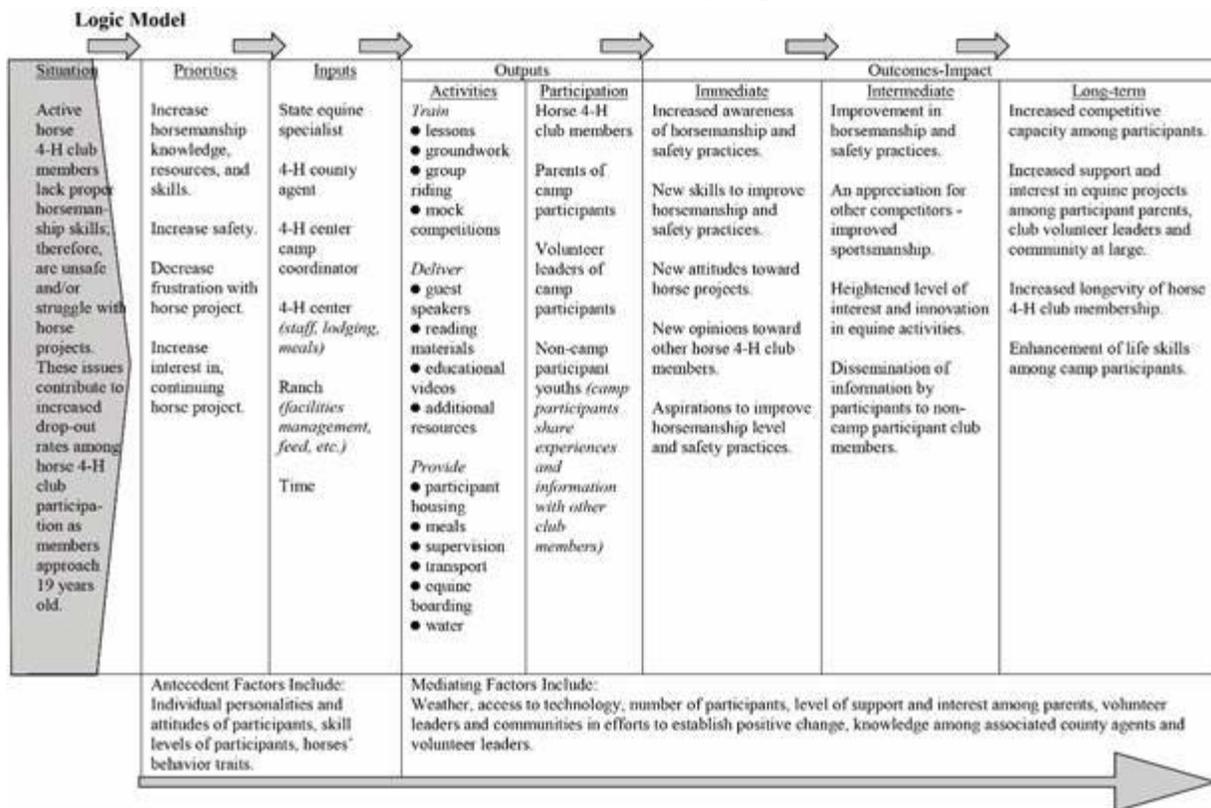
1. Increase knowledge of horsemanship principles related to the horse 4-H program.
2. Increase knowledge of safety practices related to the horse 4-H program.
3. Provide youths with applicable resources to decrease challenges with their horse projects.

Design and Implementation of a Horse 4-H Camp Curriculum

Camp developers found benefit in using a pragmatic logic model as a framework for formulating a curriculum, recruiting volunteers, recruiting participants, and, for the summer camp of 2016, determining areas of impact through goal-based evaluation (see Figure 1) (Futris & Schramm, 2015; Rennekamp & Arnold, 2009; Rennekamp & Engle, 2008).

Figure 1.

Arkansas Horse 4-H Camp Logic Model

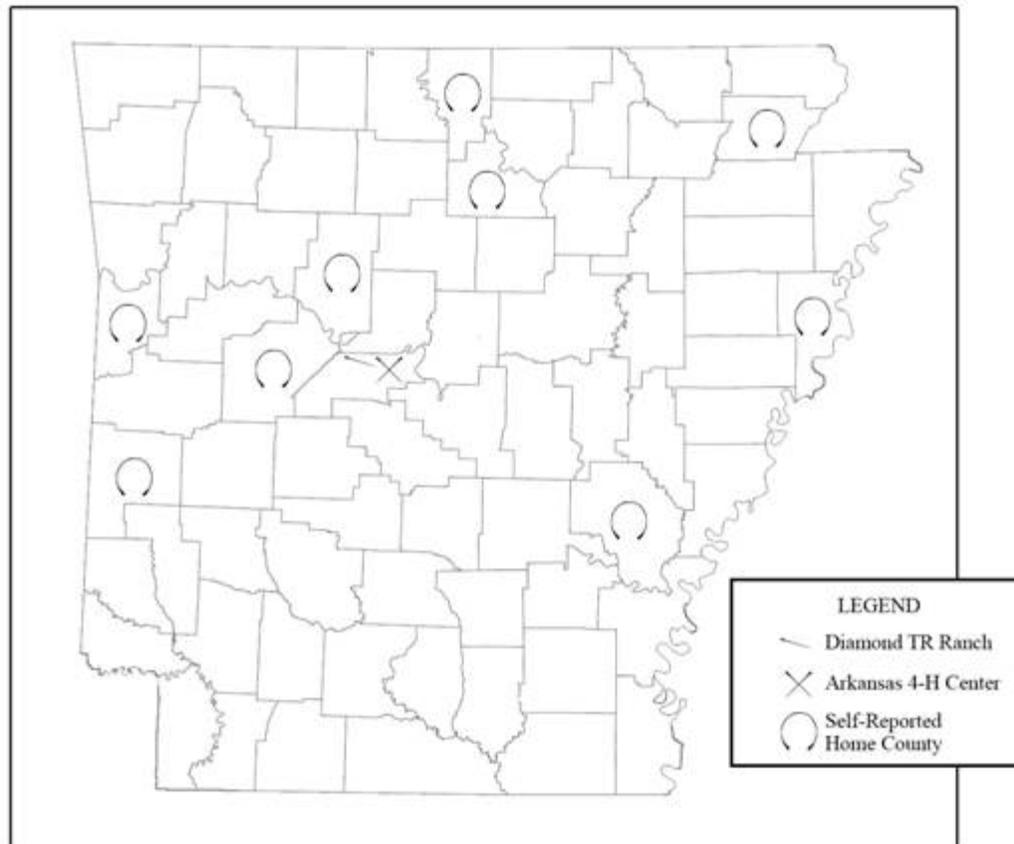


The state equine specialist primarily manages the horse 4-H camps with heavy assistance by a county agent and the Arkansas 4-H Center camping coordinator. The program curriculum is implemented by the state equine specialist, county agents with a personal investment in the equine industry, the Arkansas 4-H Center, Diamond TR Ranch, and a wide variety of volunteer equine experts. The target audience includes all current members of Arkansas horse 4-H clubs, aged 12–19, with riding experience and a horse that can be delivered to and from Diamond TR Ranch. During the 2016 summer horse 4-H camp, participants were exposed to equine professionals with a variety of backgrounds, such as collegiate equestrian, horsemanship, speed, performance, English, and ranch-style riding. Most activities were conducted in small groups and led by one or two volunteer experts. One camp highlight included a field trip to a nearby thoroughbred breeding farm and

specialized wound care research center. The participants were transported to Diamond TR Ranch each morning to engage in horse activities and from the ranch to the 4-H center located near Little Rock, Arkansas, each evening for meals and lodging; the distance between the locations is roughly 30 mi. Transportation was provided by the 4-H center. While the campers were at the 4-H center, their evening activities included swimming, canoeing, making s'mores, and watching the film *Unbranded*. The 4-H center camping coordinator was responsible for the activities and care of camp participants throughout their duration at the 4-H center. The camp participants ($n = 15$) were from nine counties throughout the state (see Figure 2).

Figure 2.

Native Location of 2016 Horse 4-H Summer Camp Participants



Evaluation Design

Participants' perceptions of the 2016 summer camp experience provided a measurement for the program's effectiveness and impact. Kirkpatrick's (1998) model guided daily field observation and pre- and posttest questionnaires and allowed the flexibility to tailor question content directly to the camp curriculum and atmosphere through the four major content areas of the model: (a) learners' reactions, (b) learning, (c) behaviors, and (d) overall results of a program. The purpose of using this framework was to fulfill the camp coordinator's desire for program accountability, enhancement of services to participants, and increased recruitment of all stakeholders (Arnold & Cater, 2016; Bennett, 1975; Diem, 2003; Lekies & Bennett, 2011).

Impact

Average group scores on questionnaires indicated that interactions with equine experts enhanced participants' horsemanship skills, decreased unsafe practices, and increased youths' desire to continue investing time with

equine projects. Group averages in nearly all content areas were above the median level on Likert-type scales. Scores in horsemanship etiquette and safety increased by 22%; aspirations to seek magazines and training videos were expressed by 53% and 47% of respondents, respectively. Confidence levels increased in 70% of horsemanship skill areas (e.g., riding with a group of people, staying balanced while riding), and nearly all participants aspired to recommend that other horse 4-H members attend the 2017 summer camp. The vast majority of responses were above the "undecided" or "sometimes" descriptors; however, some decreases in posttest data did exist. Data trends illustrated that older participants and those with fewer years' equine experience finished the camp feeling less confident about completing equitation patterns. Recommendations include making a more consistent impact in the diverse population by using older participants in leadership roles (Hamilton, Northern, & Neff, 2014) and tailoring the educational components to participants' ages and/or riding levels rather than focusing on group activities (Harder, Lamm, Lamm, Rose, & Rask, 2005).

Conclusion

Establishment of the horse 4-H camps was a creative response to a specific need in the Arkansas youth population (Seevers & Graham, 2012). The results of the 2016 summer camp evaluation were developed into a report and condensed into a vignette for key stakeholders. The vignette illustrated the significant findings of the study and included photographs of camp activities. The purpose of this communication piece is to increase motivation, participation, and retention of expert volunteers. Aligned with the expressed concern of Borden, Perkins, and Hawkey (2014), the multiphase evaluation was designed to be innovative and provide camp coordinators insight on the target population's needs. For more information about the evaluation practices or instruments, please contact the Arkansas equine specialist, Mark Russell.

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