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The Value of 4-H Judging Teams—Missouri Dairy Judging Alumni Survey

Abstract

Former Missouri 4-H Dairy Judging Team members responded to a survey about life skills development and the value of the judging team experience. Results of the survey indicate that judging team experience was highly influential in the development of communication, public speaking, and presentation skills. Respondents also indicated that judging team experience was valuable in introducing them to opportunities in agriculture and the dairy industry, educational opportunities, and professional opportunities. Eighty-four percent of the respondents currently use their evaluation and decision-making skills both professionally and personally. All respondents indicated that judging activity benefits outweigh the costs associated with maintaining judging teams.

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Introduction

Life skills gained by those who have judged on state teams (those who have participated in national-level competition) have been demonstrated. University of Georgia researchers surveyed collegiate judging team alumni to determine the value of judging team programs (McCann & McCann, 1992). Nearly 1,300 alumni responded, and respondents credited judging programs with helping them develop confidence, communication skills, and decision-making skills. Similar results were found in a study conducted in Idaho to determine the impact of the 4-H animal judging program on life skills development of judging alumni. Over 97% of judging alumni indicated that their 4-H judging experience positively influenced their personal success (Nash & Sant, 2005). 4-H alumni surveyed in New Jersey also rated judging events high in helping develop life skills, including decision making, ability to relate to others, public speaking, positive self-esteem, and self-responsibility (Ward, 1996). One Missouri 4-H alumna credits judging experiences with helping her develop numerous life skills:

I have had the chance to meet some of the greatest people in the world,

visit many different states, and gain ever so vital experiences in public speaking. Giving oral reasons has helped me sharpen my speaking abilities. In today's society, communication is the key to success. (Sheppard, 2005)

The expense associated with maintaining a state judging team, however, is being challenged across the United States due to tightening budgets and the perceived small number of students affected by the judging programs. In addition, as public funds for such activities decline, more support from the private sector is needed. One study of dairy cattle judging at the 4-H and collegiate levels concluded that as public funding pressure increases, it will become imperative that more volunteers become involved in judging programs (Guthrie & Majeskie, 1997). Justification for judging programs has been editorialized in the popular press, but little research has focused on judging team value beyond life skills development. The University of Georgia study addressed the question of employment value in the survey of collegiate judging team members, noting that 70% of respondents said the judging team experience was highly valuable in their profession (McCann & McCann, 1992). The study presented here involved a survey of former Missouri 4-H Dairy Judging Team members and was conducted to determine the value of such programs related to life skills development and value to the participant throughout adulthood.

Materials and Methods

A 42-question survey was developed to determine (a) the influence of the 4-H dairy judging team experience on life skills development and educational and career path, (b) the value of the 4-H dairy judging team experience in introducing participants to opportunities in agriculture and the dairy industry, (c) the value of the 4-H dairy judging team experience to the participant personally and professionally, and (d) opinions on the value of state dairy judging teams relative to costs associated with the programs. Survey questions were developed by University of Missouri Extension faculty, with the input of stakeholders from the dairy industry. Survey questions related to life skills development were based on the 4-H targeting life skills model (Hendricks, 1998). The survey was submitted to the institutional review board and was determined to be a program evaluation that did not require the board's review (Project #1208978, Review #116864).

Participants were asked to indicate whether their experience as a member of the Missouri 4-H Dairy Judging Team increased their abilities in 22 life skills areas. Responses were based on a 4-point Likert scale: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree.

Surveys were mailed via U.S. Postal Service to 114 former Missouri 4-H Dairy Judging Team members on August 26, 2013. Additional contacts were made via social media sites with 40 of the 114 former team members, and 12 of the 114 were emailed directly. Those who were also contacted electronically were provided with a Survey Monkey link to the survey. Those who received the survey in the mail had the option of responding on the paper document and returning it via U.S. mail or responding electronically via the Survey Monkey link provided on the first page of the survey. Reminder postcards were mailed October 1, 2013. A total of 55 responses (48.2%) were received. Twenty-one respondents mailed their survey responses. These survey responses were entered into Survey Monkey manually for the purposes of data gathering and analysis. Respondents had participated on the judging team sometime from 1971 to 2012.

Results

Demographics

Study participants were categorized into five age groups. Although the 41–50 age group had the highest level of participation, accounting for 26% of respondents, all age groups were well represented. The 31–40 and 51-and-over age groups each accounted for 24% of respondents, with the remainder of respondents in the 18–24 age group (16%) and the 25–30 age group (10%).

Eighty-six percent of respondents were involved in 4-H 7–10 years as a member; the remaining 14% were involved 4–6 years. Sixty percent of respondents were female. Participants were asked an open-ended question regarding their current occupation. Responses were grouped into dairy and related fields (29%), other agriculture occupations (20%), full-time student (13%), and all others (39%).

Education

Fifty percent of respondents indicated that their experience as a member of the Missouri 4-H Dairy Judging Team influenced their decision to attend a particular college or university. Responses related to this question included the following comments:

- "My experience in 4-H dairy judging guided my decision to apply at a college that I could continue judging cattle."
- "Yes, I wanted to attend a university that offered a program in dairy science."

When asked whether their experiences as a member of the Missouri 4-H Dairy Judging Team influenced their educational path, 56% responded yes. Qualitative data regarding this question included the following responses:

- "Participating on the team was part of my influence in becoming an Animal Science major and participating on the college dairy team."
- "It reinforced my passion for the agriculture industry."
- "I had the desire and ambition to continually learn and improve my judging skills."

Forty-eight percent of respondents participated on a collegiate level dairy judging team, and another 4% participated on a collegiate team related to another species.

Life Skills Development

Survey participants were asked to indicate whether their experience as a member of the Missouri 4-H Dairy Judging Team increased their skills in 22 life skills areas. Responses were based on a 4-point Likert scale: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree. Table 1 shows the rankings of

those life skills based on the cumulative responses in the Agree and Strongly Agree categories.

Table 1.
Life Skills Development

Life Skill	% Agree	% Strongly Agree	Total
Communication	20	80	100
Public Speaking	20	80	100
Presentation Skills	22	78	100
Meeting New People	30	70	100
Decision Making	34.7	65.3	100
Critical Thinking	38	62	100
Marketable/Useful Skills	42	58	100
Social Skills	42	58	100
Leadership	40	56	96
Teamwork	46	54	100
Self-Motivation	44	54	98
Building Relationships	44	54	98
Problem Solving	48	50	98
Self-Esteem	50	50	100
Commitment	50	50	100
Sportsmanship	52	48	100
Self-Discipline	54	46	100
Goal Setting	58	42	100
Preparation for Career	50	42	92
Cooperation	62	38	100
Ethics	58	38	96
Character	62	36	98



The highest percentage of Strongly Agree responses were in the speaking skill areas, indicating that the preparation for oral reasons was instrumental in the development of these skills. The least impact appears to have occurred in the area of preparation for career, although the percentage of Disagree responses was relatively low.

Value of Judging Team Experience

Survey participants were asked to respond to questions regarding the value of their experience as a member of the Missouri 4-H Dairy Judging Team in introducing them to opportunities in agriculture and the dairy industry. Responses are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2.
Value of Judging Team Experience

	Not Valuable	Valuable	Highly Valuable	Total
Opportunities in Agriculture	2%	48%	50%	100%
Opportunities in Dairy Industry	2%	54%	44%	100%

Survey participants also were asked to evaluate the value of their experience as a member of the Missouri 4-H Dairy Judging Team to them educationally and professionally. Results are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3.
Educational and Professional Value

	Not Valuable	Valuable	Highly Valuable	Total
Value Educationally	0%	56%	44%	100%
Value Professionally	2%	58%	40%	100%

When asked how interviewers for their first job after graduation viewed their judging experience, 44% responded that it was viewed as desirable as an indicator of extracurricular involvement, and

16% indicated that it was viewed as highly desirable because of the interviewers' familiarity with the program. When asked whether the judging team experience on a prospective job candidate's resume would be a positive factor to them as an employer, 92% indicated yes. Qualitative responses to this question included the following comments:

- "Would let me know the candidate has good analytical skills, is a good communicator, and has good self-confidence."
- "It would show me that this candidate was a hard worker, team player, self-disciplined, has great social skills, and has good leadership skills as well as many more great skills."
- "An individual that makes the state team has character traits that would be desirable to an employer. To be on the team an individual must be responsible, reliable and confident, also have a good memory. These are all skills I would be looking for if I were to hire someone."
- "Becoming a team member takes time, effort, dedication and perseverance. It also requires development of critical thinking and communication skills, as well as learning to be comfortable speaking in front of unknown audiences. Those are all valuable employee skills."

Reflecting on current use of evaluation and decision-making skills, 84% of respondents said they currently use these life skills both professionally and personally.

Benefits Versus Cost of Program

Survey participants were asked, "In view of the sometimes small number of students involved in competitive judging activities, is the expense worth the benefit to those involved?" One hundred percent of respondents indicated yes, and qualitative responses to this question included the following comments:

- "At any given time the number of students involved on the judging team is small but over time the cumulative number of participants becomes quite significant. The positive influence these people have in a number of subsequent life situations and the benefit to society is immeasurable."
- "These experiences will last a lifetime and they are highly educational. There are many skills learned with these activities that can't be learned in books or classroom."
- "I don't know how you can put an expense on something that makes people better. I still use the skills from judging today."

Survey participants were asked, "In view of the ever changing world of agriculture, do you believe competitive judging activities will be more, equally, or less important to agriculture students in the future?" Fifty percent of participants answered more, and 38% answered equally, indicating strong support for the continuation of the program. Qualitative responses to this question included the following comments:

"Critical thinking and communication will always be valuable skills."

- "I believe the dedication these students have will continue to put them in front of the pack when applying/interviewing for jobs."
- "The skills I learned in judging competition will only be of more demand on the job market."

Implications and Conclusions

Much has been written about the development of life skills throughout an individual's 4-H experience. This survey further substantiates the life skills development unrelated to a specific project. Life skills development was most significant in the areas of communication, public speaking, and presentation—skills that are applicable in most professions. This survey also indicates that Missouri 4-H Dairy Judging Team alumni strongly support the program and its continuation. Many indicated that they would be willing to support the program financially to help ensure that it continues, acknowledging that public funds for this type of program seem to be dwindling. One respondent commented, "Missouri 4-H should reach out to former team members for help to train teams, put on contests and practices, and for fund raising to help further fund the program."

Although this survey was specific to a state's dairy judging team, with some adaptation, it could be used to gather data about experiences judging other species, such as livestock, horses, and poultry, and being on other state teams that compete in national contests. The survey also could be replicated in other states, and data could be aggregated. Survey questions will be shared upon request, and collaboration with other states is welcome. Additional data would further strengthen the case for funding from the private sector and individual donors. In addition, Extension can continue to support these activities because of the value to the development of those involved.

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