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Demanding More: 4-H's Diversity and Inclusion Efforts Are Simply Not Enough

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Demanding More: 4-H's Diversity and Inclusion Efforts Are Simply Not Enough

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Abstract. Several youth organizations, such as 4-H, are reaffirming their commitment to diversity and inclusion in the workplace due to social and political events in 2020. Despite the national reckoning around civil rights, the author argues that racial and ethnic minorities are still not fully integrated into the 4-H culture. Addressing inclusion presents challenges; however, these can be better addressed when individuals realize the difficult conversations and actions needed to evoke change. The article concludes with a set of action items for the 4-H system, which focuses on investments, accountability, recognition, and transparency.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF 4-H BEGINNINGS

The National 4-H Council describes itself as “community of more than 100 public universities across the nation that provides experiences where young people learn by doing” (National 4-H Council, 2020). For more than 100 years, 4H has welcomed young people of all beliefs and backgrounds, giving kids a voice to express who they are and how they make their lives and communities better (National 4-H Council, 2020). Unfortunately, while this simplistic statement points to actions that have touched the lives of youth within this youth development organization, it doesn't reveal the underbelly of systemic racism that is pervasive in this national organization, often excluding Black, brown, and other underrepresented groups of youth.

When we peel back the history of 4-H, we see an organization developed within a culture of Jim Crow and other segregation policies that forced young black youth to learn valuable life skills in a separate “yet equal” system. African American 4-H clubs were formed and supported by Black agricultural colleges and extension agents within the 1890 Cooperative Extension system. Under these separate yet equal policies, Extension educators were delivering content to meet the needs of African American youth with little to no support from the National 4-H System and earning significantly less than their white counterparts. After the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision on public school segregation, excluded 4-H programs were deemed unconstitutional. By no means did this court decision translate to the full inclusion of African Americans in Cooperative Extension. Instead, African American Extension agents mainly filled servant positions, such as those hired under the World War I emergency funds in 1919 to show residents how to safeguard their homes or as “helpers” for white county agents during canning season (Jones, 2002). In Extension's history, there are numerous documented examples of Black Extension agents creating opportunities (Wessel & Wessel, 1982). Federal civil rights laws were in place, but black Extension agents worked in an environment that reflected the values, attitudes, and beliefs of a separate but equal system. After more than 50 years since this particular civil rights era, is it still relevant to ask whether 4-H and the broader Cooperative Extension system facilitate, foster, and promote inclusive environments?

A FOUNDATION STEEPED IN SERVING ONLY A FEW

In reviewing the Extension system, history reveals a foundation based on providing services to meet the needs of a few (Schor, 1986; Whyne, 1998; Waalkes, 1998; Harris, 2008). Schor (1986) notes, “Extension first became interested in the white farmer, then in his wife, his son, his daughter and last, the Negroes, regardless of the early

influence of Booker T. Washington, Campbell, and Pierce. Other groups, such as friends from (and within) foreign lands, were added after World War II". However, during the 1950s, Black Extension agents were still far fewer in numbers compared to white agricultural science agents and white home demonstration agents. At the county level, there were even fewer Black specialists, and Black Extension agents covered twice the number of counties as whites, received fewer 4-H staff and resources, and unsurprisingly, worked for one-half to two-thirds the salary of their white counterparts. There are several reasons behind the conditions, but we cannot ignore the most critical limiting factor: a system of racist and discriminatory policies (Harris, 2008; Iverson, 2008). Similar conditions are present now. Although the push to create an inclusive environment within Cooperative Extension is evidenced by national civil rights laws and an oversight office (Gear, 1992), questions still arise regarding practices limiting the full potential of 4-H and its ability to create inclusive environments for all youth. Now is the time for 4-H to walk the walk to make the best better.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE

As an organization designed to assist youth development, 4-H staff, educators, and administrators must be held accountable for the conditions and environments they create for young people—everyone from local field staff to state offices to the national office plays a part. Accountability and action require institutional language and measures to ensure individuals are held responsible for creating inclusive and accessible environments for the youth and adults working in the programs. Operating from a place of equity and inclusion is essential to reaching today's diverse youth populations. In order to transform the system, Extension must recognize and address the existing limitations of diverse perspectives, identities, and cultures. The following points are offered as ideas for starting earnest conversations addressing the difficult, yet necessary actions for a change with regards to access, equity, and equality across 4-H:

1. Investing in diversity at the table—one or a few are unacceptable
 - a. Examine the voices and diversity of individuals sitting on boards and national committees. Consider, for example, the low number of ethnically diverse individuals among the National 4-H Board of Trustees (National 4-H Council, 2020) or the editorial boards of Extension-based publications about 4-H efforts.
 - b. These boards should be driving the call for more significant equity and equal representation—the inclusion of one or two ethnic or racially diverse individuals does not equal diversity nor greater inclusion.
2. Devoting and supporting equitable employment at all levels
 - a. The hiring of racially and ethnically diverse personnel throughout all levels of the organization is lacking. Counties and states with large ethnic populations require staff at the local and state levels that reflect these populations. For example, conversations must move beyond, “we have one Black State Specialist,” or “we are unable to find qualified applicants.” These types of excuses are no longer acceptable.
3. Recognizing the need for culturally relevant 4-H material
 - a. It is necessary to recognize and support more significant culturally-appropriate material designed and developed by educators from these particular communities. When content developed for 4-H programs does not integrate diverse cultural perspectives or is created by individuals with little or no understanding of cultural perspectives, youth of diverse racial or ethnic backgrounds can feel excluded and perhaps disengage from programs and activities.
4. Supporting the design and use of culturally appropriate evaluation tools
 - a. 4-H will continue to perpetuate a system of exclusionary research practices if they continue with their:
 - i. overreliance of evaluation tools not tested with robust ethnically diverse populations but considered valid;
 - ii. neglect of race and identity constructs which can lead to better data on the impact of 4-H programs with these particular populations and;

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- iii. exclusion of Black and brown and other ethnic researchers/teams that can contribute to the development of instruments that speak to the points mentioned above and assist in creating richer datasets that showcase the breadth and depth of racially diverse youth.
5. Holding staff accountable
 - a. Staff and administrators of 4-H programs must be held responsible by the National level or by university administrators for failing to ensure that diversity and equity policies and actions are upheld or intentionally seeking to limit diversity efforts because “it takes too much work.”
 6. Transparency in the numbers
 - a. Greater transparency is needed in the representation of racially and ethnically diverse youth in 4-H at all levels.

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