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## Council of Presidents: A Multifaceted Idea for 4-H

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## Council of Presidents: A Multifaceted Idea for 4-H

### Abstract

Communication between 4-H professionals and the youth they work with is an important part of a successful 4-H program. By creating a Council of Presidents comprised of officers of all the clubs in your county, you can increase communication while assuring your program addresses all four essential elements. The Council is also as a vehicle for teaching leadership, Parliamentary Procedures, and problem-solving skills using experiential adventure activities. I have found when youth are given tools and information through interactive and engaging activities, the tools and information are recalled and implemented in their club setting.

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## Introduction

4-H club programs can benefit from direct communication between the youth and the 4-H professionals in order to address the needs of youth. Through the years, I and my colleagues have heard from club leaders who "speak for" their kids about what the youth in their club want to see happen, which, coincidentally enough, is exactly in line with the leaders own personal agenda. This leaves a large gap in the youth voice in the program. Youth never become a part of a discussion as leaders resistant to change never take the discussion to their clubs.

One way of circumventing the "leader filter" in a 4-H program is for elected officers to automatically be made members of a county's Council of Presidents (COP). This Council would address several facets of the 4-H program: teaching youth Parliamentary Procedures; teaching leadership skills; increasing communication between youth and the 4-H professionals; and acting as a vehicle for countywide community service projects that are youth led. It would be a bit different than the traditional Teen Council in that it would include all member-age youth (4th grade and up) who are officers, reaching a broader spectrum of youth, and it would meet quarterly for 3 hours at a time. To motivate youth to participate, those who attend all meetings in a year receive an enameled 4-H officer pin that is awarded at the end of the year recognition event.

The goals of the COP are to:

1. Increase mastery of skill in leadership among elected club officers,

2. Increase independence through direct communication between program youth and 4-H professionals,
3. Increase sense of belonging through interaction among 4-H youth enrolled in a variety of project areas as they represent their club at the county level, and
4. Provide an opportunity for generosity as youth plan and implement a countywide community service project required for member in good standing.

## **How a Council of Presidents Works**

Thirty-five youth have participated in the COP since it was implemented in 2011. During the 3-hour meetings, youth hear about local, state, and national opportunities in 4-H and are given the responsibility of taking the information back to their clubs. The county newsletter is referenced several times and distributed to youth to familiarize themselves with its contents. Using adventure-based activities and games, youth learn leadership and problem-solving skills as well as Parliamentary Procedures. For example, when learning how to make a motion, we make trail mix. Each ingredient is voted on and then added as we go along. I make sure to bring a can of sardines so youth see how a motion dies. Several clubs have repeated the games in their own clubs to teach the concepts.

## **The Essential Elements**

The National 4-H Impact Design Implementation Team found eight essential elements necessary for positive youth development (CSREES, 2001). The eight elements were condensed to four key concepts (Kress, 2009). Youth development professionals have worked to prove the presence of one or more of these elements in programs lead to positive youth development (Hensley, Place, Jordan, & Israel, 2007; Javiette & Rose, 2011; Sallee & Peek, 2014). The COP provides for these four essential elements. The direct communication with the 4-H staff has led to an increased sense of INDEPENDENCE as youth increase their responsibilities to the club as an officer. Club members look to them for information about opportunities in 4-H as well as their leadership in running a club meeting instead of the leader. In addition, youth learn leadership skills during the quarterly meetings, leading to MASTERY of skills in Parliamentary Procedures, communication, and knowledge about the workings of the country program. In 2012, the youth addressed GENEROSITY through the Council. New Jersey added community service to the Member in Good Standing criteria. The youth of COP took the lead in planning and implementing a countywide community service project.

The added benefit of the COP is that it breaks down the silos among clubs. Youth often only interact with others in their clubs or project area, even during fair week. This added a sense of BELONGING as they increased their circle of caring to youth outside their clubs and in various project areas.

## **Impacts/Implications**

Youth surveyed post-session were asked to rank the most helpful things about the Council. They reported the teambuilding activity (45%), the Parliamentary Procedure activity (30%), and learning about by-laws (25%).

In 2011, youth were asked to reflect on and rank their overall 4-H experience in relation to the essential elements. Sixty percent ranked experiencing a sense of INDEPENDENCE first and MASTERY of skill second from their 4-H experience. The same percentage of youth reported wanting more GENEROSITY in their 4-H experience. Using the results from the essential elements survey, the youth were charged with planning and implementing a community service project of their choosing to be conducted at the county fair. Youth chose to remove garbage that "missed" the cans around the animal barns and set up a display to educate the public on the dangers of not taking responsibility for their aim. The garbage is collected in clear bags daily before the fair opens and put in a wire bin that was created in year 2 of the project by the youth. The bin, located in the 4-H building, allowed fairgoers to see what and how much garbage could potentially harm their project animals if not properly disposed.

Leaders of four different clubs report officers who participate in the Council of Presidents return to their club meetings with useful handouts for members; they feel officers have the tools necessary to run business meeting through increased understand of how to make a motion, how to use a gavel, clear and defined job descriptions for officers, and printed templates of agendas. In addition, leaders report richer business meetings with less of the burden on them to run the meetings.

When youth are given tools and information through interactive and engaging activities, the tools and information are recalled and implemented during club meetings. Youth are more confident in their abilities to run meetings and are seen as knowledgeable resources in their clubs by non officer youth.

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