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Creating the Southern Region 4-H Volunteer Advisory Group

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Creating the Southern Region 4-H Volunteer Advisory Group

Abstract

The SR4-HVAG combines the efforts of states to provide quality educational programming for volunteers and Extension professionals using an advisory group system. An advisory group rather than a council was created because the group provides programmatic input rather than sets policy. The purposes of the SR4-HVAG are to: provide a mechanism for volunteer input and perspective regarding educational, programmatic and developmental needs of volunteers and strengthen communication and delivery systems that provide for the continued sharing of resources and programmatic efforts in the Southern Region. Each state is represented by two volunteers and is facilitated by a state volunteerism specialist.

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Introduction

Volunteers are fundamentally important in delivering 4-H Youth Development programs in every state and region (Ouellette, Lesmeister, & Loble, 2014). Extension has engaged volunteers in developing educational events and programs since its inception (Ripley, Cummings, & Lockett, 2012). The role of an Extension Advisory Board is to plan and conduct effective educational programs and lend guidance to assessing needs and determining program emphasis (Ebling, 1985).

The Southern Region, with more 4-H volunteers than any other Extension region, (National 4-H Council, 2010) has a long history of collaboration, capacity building, teamwork, and support. The Southern Region 4-H Volunteer Advisory Group (SR4-HVAG) was created to educate, mobilize, connect, and support volunteers and Extension professionals who engage volunteers and coordinate volunteer programs.

Developing the Regional Advisory Group: Purpose, Structure, & Function

The purpose of the SR4-HVAG is to combine efforts of states to provide quality educational programming for volunteers and Extension professionals using an advisory group system. An advisory group rather than council was created because the group provides programmatic input rather than sets policy.

Well-organized advisory groups are key to quality Extension programs (Barnett, Johnson, & Verma, 1999). Extension advisory groups serve several purposes, including accelerating educational change, strengthening program decisions, and providing beneficial learning experiences (Pesson, 1966). Ripley, Cummings, and Lockett (2012) suggested that Extension should continue to rely heavily on advisory groups to lead visioning and strategic planning efforts.

Pesson (1966) identified useful functions of Extension advisory groups, including advising Extension professionals on programs, analyzing and interpreting local situations to identify needs and problems, and legitimizing and communicating program decisions among the community. Therefore, the SR4-HVAG provides a voice and volunteer perspective to develop and provide programming that is designed to meet the needs of volunteers across the Southern Region. The purposes of the SR4-HVAG are to:

- Provide a mechanism for volunteer input and perspective regarding educational, programmatic, and developmental needs of volunteers, and
- Strengthen communication and delivery systems that provide for the continued sharing of resources and programmatic efforts in the Southern Region.

The SR4-HVAG is a partnership between volunteerism specialists and volunteers, with each state being represented by two volunteers serving two consecutive 2-year terms on a rotating basis. The SR4-HVAG is facilitated by a state volunteerism specialist who also may serve two consecutive 2-year terms. The process for identifying volunteers rests with the volunteerism specialist at each state's 1862 land-grant university. A Volunteer Position Description serves as a recruitment tool to identify the most effective advisory group members.

Recognizing that the educational value of Extension programs lies in both the program's content and the process used to develop those programs (Cole, 1980), the SR4-HVAG effectively includes Ebling's (1985) identified essential ingredients to successful advisory committees, including assembling the right mix of individuals, ensuring that they understand their charge, and affirming their level of commitment.

Hybrid Meeting Approaches: Mixing Virtual with Face-to-Face

The physical presence at a certain place and time precludes many prospective volunteers from serving, but virtual volunteerism overcomes this dilemma (Conhaim, 2003; Gardyn, 2006). Because the nature of Extension's work has changed, successful face-to-face meetings may rely on electronic follow-up methods to update information, keep participants engaged, and evaluate practice changes (Sobrero, 2008). The Internet transforms the way people work and how they search for and find information. The Internet continues to change how Extension creates and delivers educational programs. State lines are less important when using the Internet (Sobrero & Craycraft, 2008) as an educational tool and a method of communication.

New technologies continue to provide opportunities for Extension. Online conferencing systems offer innovative ways to meet programmatic needs while reducing travel time and costs. However, implementing and gaining acceptance of this technology requires purposeful and planned efforts (Murphrey & Coppernoll, 2006). As members of the SR4-HVAG are dispersed across the region, three meetings are held via teleconference to maximize efficiency while conserving travel time and dollars. However, Rogan and Simmons (1984) recognized that one of the disadvantages of teleconferencing was a lack of informal, one-on-one social interaction and the challenge of creating an atmosphere of group rapport. Therefore, a 2-day face-to-face meeting is held annually. This serves as the kick-off meeting for the new program year and is attended by incoming and retiring members of the advisory group.

The SR4-HVAG provides recommendations, guidance for volunteer development activities, and opportunities and direction for volunteer efforts and education. Additionally, the advisory group provides general input for the 4-H Volunteer Conference of Southern States but does not serve as the conference planning committee. During the conference, members of the advisory group serve as discussion leaders and facilitators during networking and evaluation sessions.

Accomplishments

Accomplishments achieved during the advisory group's first year, included:

- Collecting three complete sets of data, including:
 - Identification and prioritization of volunteer programming issues, needs, and concerns
 - Input on 4-H programming needs across the region
 - Evaluation of the inaugural Volunteer Conference of Southern States
- Developing fact sheets and lesson plans for the *Southern Region 4-H Volunteer Handbook*

Challenges

Not every state in the region supported the concept of the regional volunteer advisory group. While every state was invited to participate, two states chose not to do so. The only identified potential disadvantage of participation in the advisory group is the cost of time and travel associated with attending the face-to-face meeting, held in conjunction with the Volunteer Conference of Southern States.

While advisory group members were all supportive and committed to the plan of work and timeline, keeping advisory group members focused and on-task was a continual challenge without face-to-face interactions. For many individuals, providing input was preferred to developing resources and materials.

Conclusions & Implications for Extension

- The hybrid approach to the regional advisory group works best with a blend of face-to-face and online meetings. It is recommended that the group's initial meeting be face-to-face, with significant time devoted to get-acquainted, team-building, and bonding activities.
- Technology challenges affect the group's work and its function. Not all members of the advisory group can access online webinar presentations. This necessitates that teleconferencing is the most practical means of meeting.
- The regional volunteer advisory group provided the opportunity for more volunteers to accept a leadership role and provide programmatic input, guidance, and direction.
- A large quantity of data was collected to help guide both the volunteer and program development processes in the region.

A combination of one traditional, face-to-face meeting, followed by three teleconference meetings provided the initial operational structure for the SR4-HVAG. This group provides a volunteer perspective and input on volunteer and program development across the region, as well as leadership opportunities for an array of volunteers. It is critical to the success of the group that the volunteer specialists in the region support the advisory group and provide guidance, support, input, and direction. The regional advisory group cannot function without strong leadership, direction, and the facilitation skills of one or more state volunteerism specialists.

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