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## Intergenerational Panels at Centennial Events: Stimulating Discussion About Continuity and Change in the 4-H Program

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## Intergenerational Panels at Centennial Events: Stimulating Discussion About Continuity and Change in the 4-H Program

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**Abstract:** *This article introduces an intergenerational strategy for organizations planning centennial celebratory events. The methods and findings from the 4-H through the Generations session conducted at the joint 4-H Leadership Conference and 4-H Leaders Forum to celebrate the Pennsylvania 4-H Centennial are reported. Youth and adult participants shared their views, experiences, and hopes for 4-H via panel presentations and small group discussions. An analysis of themes introduced by the panelists and conference participants suggested that this approach can be effective in raising awareness of past accomplishments and current challenges and in stimulating conversation about future directions for the 4-H organization.*

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## Introduction

When organizations reach the Centennial mark, there are unprecedented opportunities to draw attention to organizational history and accomplishments. On a national level, 4-H celebrated its 100 years in 2002 (4-H National Headquarters, 2012), and as this youth organization draws closer to the Smith/Lever Act centennial (2014), many states are focusing on how their past has influenced programs in the present.

In Pennsylvania, with 2012 marking the 100-year signpost of 4-H youth programming in the state, awareness and preparation for the Centennial engendered an array of events, campaigns, and other organized activity. Efforts to celebrate the Centennial include the

following.

- A collection of stories: 4-H members, volunteer leaders, 4-H alumni, former 4-H leaders, and others impacted by the 4-H program are contributing their stories about PA 4-H for an upcoming publication.
- Historical exhibits: Collections of historical photos, uniforms, pictures, awards, quilts, and reports are being put on display at various fairs and gatherings at which 4-H has a major presence.
- Fundraising campaign: Fundraising letters sent to 4-H volunteers, alumni, and past/current donors note the Centennial as a way to emphasize the organization's record of sustainability and growth.
- Centennial mementos: Commemorative items such as Centennial T-shirts, pens, and magnets serve to reinforce a sense of organizational pride and identity.
- Special celebrations at statewide events: For the Centennial year (2012), the State 4-H Leadership Conference (for 4-H youth) and the 4-H Leaders Forum (for adult volunteers) were merged into a single event. During the event, the 4-H through the Generations session, the main focus of this article, served as a mechanism to facilitate intergenerational dialogue about 4-H from different perspectives and at different periods in time.

The 4-H through the Generations session consisted of pre-banquet dinner presentations by five panelists, ranging in age from 13 to 80, followed by small, mixed-age group discussions in which participants shared information and insights from their 4-H experiences. As with most other "intergenerational programs" (Kaplan & Brintnall-Peterson, 2001/2002; Kaplan, Liu, & Radhakrishna, 2003), defined by the National Council on Aging as "activities or programs that increase cooperation, interaction or exchange between any two generations" (Thorp, 1985, p. 3), the goal was not just to bring different generations together but to provide a method and opportunity for participants to share information, insights, and experience.

There were four objectives of this session:

- *A recognition of 4-H history*: Facilitate intergenerational conversations about 4-H members' experiences over the past 50-70 years.
- *A celebration of 4-H history*: Generate a shared (multi-generational) sense of appreciation about the value of 4-H for youth, their families, and their communities.
- *A realistic look at the challenges facing 4-H*: Identify perceived challenges for the future of 4-H.
- *A shared commitment and vision for 4-H's future*: Generate ideas and strategies for strengthening 4-H in the future.

Any organization with 100+ years of history has a wide array of stakeholders. For 4-H, this includes youth, parents, volunteers, staff members, funders, and local and statewide advisory group members. At any point in time, there is the living presence of several generations of people who have filled each of these roles. The inclusion of an intergenerational component into the Pennsylvania 4-H Centennial celebration served to add another layer of diversity in the views previously expounded about 4-H—where it has been and where it might go in the future.

Beyond reporting on the 4-H focus and significance of this strategy, this article explores possible applications of this intergenerational panel approach for other organizations reaching the centennial milestone and for implementation in settings other than large conference meetings.

## Methods

### The Program

Of the 440 people who participated in the 4-H through the Generations session, 360 were youth, and 80 were adults (including staff, presenters, and special guests). The program took place in a large conference center banquet hall. "Greeters" were on hand to encourage the conference participants to choose seats in a manner that would create 44 mixed-age tables, each with an average of 10 people.

The first part of the program, the intergenerational panel, lasted for 45 minutes, including presentation time and questions from the audience.

There were five panelists:

- A retired state program leader (80 years of age)
- A 4-H/youth development educator (38 years of age)
- A Collegiate 4-H member (university upper classman) (19 years of age)
- A current older 4-H member (university under classman) (18 years of age)

- A current younger 4-H member (13 years of age)

To help the panelists frame their brief (3-5 minute) presentations, they were given the following guidance before the day of the event:

Let the audience know what 4-H means to you. Perhaps you have a short story or example to share. In framing your comments, consider the program's contributions for participating youth, families, communities, and society as a whole. Feel free to share your thoughts about where 4-H is headed in the future. Keep in mind that you only have a short time - 3-5 minutes.

The facilitator, a Penn State Extension District Director who is heavily involved in the 4-H program, played a major role during the panel presentations. She introduced the panelists, ensured that they remained brief in their comments, fielded a few remarks/questions from the audience, and provided a few insightful comments based on her own experience to conclude this part of the session. She also interacted with the audience in an attempt to keep them engaged in the intergenerational dialog.

Following the intergenerational panel presentations, the 440 people in the banquet hall were asked to engage in small group discussions at their tables. The following instructions were posted at the front of the room (as a PowerPoint slide) and on handouts placed at each of the 44 tables.

1. Find the 3 index cards that have been placed at your table.
2. Discuss 4-H - as it has changed over the past few generations, as it has remained the same, and as you would like to see it in the future.
3. Come to a consensus on three points or ideas for each of these discussion categories.
4. Choose a "recorder" who will write down key points on the three cards at the table (one card for each discussion category).
5. We will collect these cards after 15 minutes of group discussion.

After this activity, and during a break in the banquet conference program, six 4-H State Council officers collected a total of 114 (of 132 requested) cards, with each card conveying up to three points or comments about 4-H. Thirty-six cards noted ways 4-H has remained the same, 36 noted ways in which the organization has changed, and 42 noted ways they would like to see 4-H change in the future.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

In the 2-month period following the collection of index cards from the small group discussions, the text was content analyzed, with particular attention aimed at identifying themes related to participants' perceptions of organizational continuity, change, and visions for the future.

Taking a grounded theory approach to this data set (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), two of the four members of the research team (all co-authors of this article) worked individually and together to develop a response coding system for analyzing these qualitative data. Data were then sorted into thematic coding categories for content analysis. The collective process of coding the text on the cards involved discussing the full range of responses, creating tentative codes to accommodate the range of responses, observing patterns among codes, and combining them into subcategories and again into categories (Patton, 2002).

To address issues of reliability, after the coding and categorization system was finalized, both members of the team made independent coding decisions for all of the text. Of the 294 discernible responses written on the 114 cards, the two researchers made consistent coding decisions for 275 responses, thereby achieving an inter-coder reliability rate of 93.5%.

The intergenerational panel presentations were recorded, transcribed, and reviewed for thematic content, particularly with regard to alignment with coding categories established to analyze small group discussion responses. Emphasis was placed on identifying panelist quotes that provided additional detail and helped illustrate areas of nuanced meaning for the themes noted in the small group discussions.

## **Results**

The major themes that emerged from the small group discussions and panel presentations are presented in three segments: ways in which 4-H *has not changed* over the past few generations (Table 1), ways in which 4-H *has changed* (Table 2), and participants' *visions for the future* of 4-H (Table 3). There are definitive areas of overlap between the note card data set and many of the main points made by the panel presenters; we draw from the content of the panel presentations to underscore key themes.

### **Perceptions of 4-H Continuity Over Time**

As indicated in Table 1, when small group discussion participants were asked to describe ways in which 4-H *has not changed* over the past few generations, there were 105 responses that fit into six major categories:

- Policy

- Program delivery methods/ values/goals/traditions
- Projects/educational experience
- Leadership/youth development/community involvement
- Agricultural orientation
- Fun and friends

**Table 1.**

Perceptions of Ways in which 4-H Has Not Changed Over the Past Few Generations

Main Response Category	Response Sub-Categories	Frequency of Response
Policies (23)	Flag/Symbols/Colors	7
	Same Name/Mottos/Slogan	6
	Rules	6
	Youth-oriented Focus	4
Program Delivery Methods, Values, Goals, and Traditions (20)	Values and Goals	11
	Program Delivery Methods	8
	Same Rituals and Traditions	1
Emphasis on Projects, Educational Experience (18)	Emphasis on Project-based Instruction	10
	Emphasis on Educational Experience	8
Leadership, Youth Development, and Community Involvement (16)	Emphasis on Leadership Development	8
	Youth Development	4
	Community Service	4
Agriculture-oriented (12)	Ag-based	7
	Livestock-based	4
	Farming Relationships	1
Fun and Friends (9)	Fun	4
	Meeting New People	3
	Other	2
Other (7)	[6 Sub-categories]	7

Of the many factors that participants noted as contributing to the organization's continuity and stability over time, the most common assertion was the continuity of policies (23 responses), particularly with regard to the organization's name, symbol, rules, and youth-oriented focus.

When respondents cited consistency in program delivery, they noted the underlying values and goals inherent in programs (11 responses) as well as program delivery methods (8 responses). The emphasis on leadership, particularly leadership development (8 responses), was another theme found in respondents' comments about organizational consistency over the years.

Small group discussion participants also emphasized the role of the 4-H system of project-based instruction (10 responses) and the ongoing emphasis placed on education (8 responses). The retired state program leader panel presenter noted how education has been an integral element of the 4-H model: "I know that 4-H is based upon sound educational principles. And whatever convulsions 4-H goes through for whatever reason, 4-H can be so confident that it's on a good educational track."

There were also many comments made in the small group discussions (12 responses) and panelist presentations that emphasized 4-H's roots in agriculture. The two college-age members of the panel noted how their involvement in 4-H was framed by agriculture-oriented interests and pursuits, such as membership in the 4-H beef club, pig club, livestock judging committee, and Penn State Livestock judging team. The older Penn State student, who is currently a Collegiate 4-H member, simultaneously emphasized community service, another theme that appeared in small group discussions (4 responses).

4-H is more than just about competing and showing your cattle. It's about being involved too in the community.... Getting involved in your community is how everyone learns together. And that's an important part of being a good citizen and a good 4-Her.

### Perceptions of How 4-H Has Changed Over Time

As indicated in Table 2, when small group discussion participants were asked to describe ways in which 4-H *has changed* over the past few

generations, there were 129 responses fitting into five major categories:

- Club and program-related changes
- Technology
- Projects
- Age, gender, and diversity
- Organizational expansion

**Table 2.**

Perceptions of Ways in Which 4-H Has Changed Over the Past Few Generations

Main Response Category	Response Sub-Categories	Frequency of Response
Clubs, Programs, and Other Opportunities (31)	Club-related Changes	12
	Program-related Changes	4
	Other Types of 4-H Opportunities	9
	More Procedures and Policies	3
	Changes in How Volunteers/Leaders Function	3
E-Data/ Technology (27)	E-data	13
	Other Technology Tools and Advances	14
Projects (25)	More Projects	14
	Increased Project Variety	9
	Newer Projects	2
Organizational Size/ Expansion (16)	Growth of Program	9
	Financial Challenges	4
	Global Expansion	3
Age, Gender, Diversity (12)	Change in Age Range/Limits	6
	More Diversity	3
	Gender (more females)	3
Other (8)	[6 Sub-categories]	8

Respondents reported changes in the number and variety of projects and minor structural changes in methods of delivery, such as in the way clubs operate and the technological tools that are used. This stands in contrast to responses to the previous question (about ways in which the organization has not changed), where respondents emphasized fundamental values and goals underlying program delivery systems. The organizational picture that emerges is one of an organization that has experienced some changes in program delivery systems, such as in response to advances in technology, yet not in its underlying values and goals, particularly with regard to leadership development, youth development, and community service. This is consistent with some other accounts of 4-H history, which note continuity with regard to emphasis placed on youth life skills, such as communication and leadership, and a sense of compassion and caring about the community (e.g., Van Horn, Flanagan, & Thomson, 1998).

The retired state program leader talked about the 4-H embryology program as an example of how the organization works to "expand and keep current with the times." She noted that the embryology program was able to expand as 4-H got a foothold in schools (with school-based clubs) and expanded into cities.

Organizational expansion was another major response theme. Of the 16 responses in the small group discussions that alluded to organizational growth, 12 noted positive aspects of expansion, and four noted the financial challenges of maintaining or growing the organization. One of the two college-age panelists also raised budget-related concerns:

For the future of 4-H, if you haven't heard about it the [state] government was cutting the budget by 50%. So we are losing money for our 4-H. It will be more important to show how 4-H has helped us over the years and to show what it has done for you.

**Visions and Preferences for Changes in 4-H**

As indicated in Table 3, when discussion group participants were asked to describe ways in which they would like to see 4-H change in the future, there were 60 responses fitting into five major categories:

- Membership growth and publicity
- How technology is used/embraced

- The role and prevalence of conferences and other activities
- Projects and clubs
- Diversity

**Table 3.**  
Visions for the Future of 4-H

Main Response Category	Response Sub-Categories	Frequency of Response
Membership Growth and Publicity/ Promotion (21)	Publicity/Promotion	14
	Continued Growth	7
Technology (15)	More Use of Technology	7
	More Technology Projects	5
	Anti-technology Comments	3
Conferences and Activities (13)	More Emphasis on Conferences	11
	Other Activities	2
Projects and Clubs (8)	More Projects	4
	More Clubs	4
More Diversity (4)	Gender Composition	2
	Physical/Mental Ability of Members	1
	International Connections	1
Other (5)	[5 Sub-categories]	5

As with responses to the question about how 4-H has changed, technological change was a common theme. Those who described *visions for the future* of 4-H that entailed a greater use of technology (12 responses) made suggestions such as: putting all project books online, relying more on electronic communication, and organizing more 4-H projects that highlight new technologies. In contrast, there were some anti-technology comments (3 responses), e.g., alluding to a desire to move away from the e-data system and rely more on face-to-face communication.

A theme for which there was more of a unified sentiment was a desire to place more emphasis on conferences and conference-related activities (11 responses). The 4-H educator on the panel provided personal testimony about the significance of 4-H conferences.

I was an awkward kid in school, I was just there. And then when I was 17, [my local 4-H educator] called my parents ... and said that going to a conference would be really good for me. And of course I get home from school one day, and sure enough I find out I'm going to a conference in Northwest Pennsylvania. I didn't understand anything that was going on. As I was there, a whole epiphany came over me. All of a sudden, I became a popular kid.

## Conclusions

There were four objectives for the 4-H through the Generations session in Pennsylvania. There was some success in achieving the objective of "generating a shared (multi-generational) sense of appreciation about the value of 4-H." Youth as well as adult participants of the session alluded to and provided examples of some of the same characteristics of 4-H when discussing the organization's strengths, such as its emphasis on youth leadership and personal development and community service, and the stability of the club-based program delivery system. Even though the panelists discussed their 4-H involvement at different periods in time, they articulated some of the same themes in their accounts about what 4-H means to them and conveyed a common sense of appreciation and pride associated with being affiliated with the organization.

The program also appears to have been effective in meeting the objective of "identifying perceived challenges for the future of 4-H." Respondents across generations noted some of the same challenges faced by the organization, such as tight funding scenarios, and the need to adapt to new technological developments and tools.

The program was less successful in meeting the objectives of "facilitating intergenerational conversations about 4-H members' experiences over the past 50-70 years" and "generating ideas and strategies for strengthening 4-H in the future." Certainly, there was some discussion at the tables as participants approached the task of creating lists of how 4-H *has changed* over the past few generations, how *it has remained the same*, and *how they would like to see it in the future*. However, with only 15 minutes set aside for the small group discussion, there was not enough time for all participants at each table to share their views and experiences about 4-H, come to a consensus on three points or ideas for each category, and write them out on the designated index cards. Several other factors, including

the large size of the meeting venue, the large number of participants (440), and the lack of facilitators at each table, also served to limit conversation.

In post-event discussions members of the planning team have considered several ways to modify this model so that participants have more time and opportunity for intensive intergenerational conversations about the organization's history and future prospects. One idea is to hold a series of smaller 4-H through the Generations Centennial meetings at the county level, where there would be more flexibility in terms of scheduling, use of meeting venue space, and discussion group configurations. Another idea involves integrating the intergenerational engagement concept throughout the conference. For example, the panel could introduce the topics and get discussion started, with additional rounds of small group discussions and mini-presentations of key themes taking place the following day.

Another idea that is being considered is organizing a series of follow-up meetings, both local and statewide, to review highlights and results from the large statewide event and extend the conversation to further explore current conditions, challenges, and opportunities for the organization. The planning team is currently developing a facilitator's guidebook to support efforts to replicate as well as expand upon the model.

As noted in the introduction of this article, many centennial events and celebrations focus primarily on organizational history. However, events organized around the centennial milestone could also serve a strategic planning function. There would still be conversation about the organization's history, but less so in the context of sentimental reminiscence and more as a tool for generating critical discussion about future directions and action steps for the organization.

### Implications for Extension

The intergenerational panels method described in this article provides a general framework for bringing together a diverse group of stakeholders of a centennial organization to discuss, reflect upon, and reaffirm their connection and commitment to the organization with which they are affiliated.

Although the centennial celebration strategy described in this article for stimulating discussion and debate was focused on the past, present, and future of the 4-H program, considering that the Smith/Lever Act of 1914 established funding for the entire Cooperative Extension system, this strategy can be adapted to facilitate historical reflection and future planning in other areas within Extension, including agriculture, family and consumer sciences, and economic and community development.

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