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County Clustering for the California 4-H Youth Development Program: Impacts and Lessons Learned

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Abstract: In response to budgetary constraints, a new staffing structure, the Pilot Leadership Plan, was proposed for California's 4-H Youth Development Program. County clusters were formed, each led by a coordinator. The plan was piloted for 2 years to provide insight into how county clustering could support Extension staff to increase and enhance program consistency and administrative efficiency. This article highlights key activities and innovations, impacts for staff and programming, and lessons learned in piloting a new staffing structure.

Introduction

While county clustering is a strategy used by Extension to meet budgetary constraints and create new opportunities for shared programming (Cropper & Merkwitz, 1998), only a few states have implemented it in some form, and still fewer have systematically published results about the impacts, benefits, and related issues (Hutchins, 1992; Subramaniam & Dennery, 2009). In this article we share findings from a 2-year study of county clustering in the California 4-H Youth Development Program (YDP).

County Clustering in California: The 4-H Pilot Leadership Plan

University of California Cooperative Extension (UCCE) uses a county-based staffing model. In some counties, academics known as advisors provide administrative and program oversight as well as have research and evaluation expectations. Paraprofessionals known as Program Representatives provide the day-to-day operations for programming at the local level. In the summer of 2007, California's 4-H program, administered by UCCE, began the implementation and evaluation of a new staff structure with two key elements, a) clustering of counties in each of three UCCE administrative regions and b) part-time coordination of each cluster by a youth development advisor from that region (Subramaniam & Dennery, 2008). Cluster coordinators provided support to the program representatives within their cluster and served as a bridge between research and local practice through training, creation of management and other tools, and policy coordination in partnership with the State 4-H YDP Office.

In each of the three regions, the staffing plan was adapted to meet context-specific needs and capacities. In particular, academic personnel and geographic considerations influenced the stated priorities and key strategies selected by each region (Table 1). Clusters therefore varied both by size and by specific priorities and goals (Table 2).

Table 1.
Showing Geographic and Staff Profiles of Clusters and Key Priorities

| Region/Cluster | Travel Distances | Advisors | Priorities | Key Strategies |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------|---|--|--|
| NCMR Entire region: 23 counties | Significant travel distances | Three to four advisors in the entire region | Increase support to program representatives and provide opportunities for professional development | Training, communication and resource sharing through online technology tools |
| CVR Four counties | Counties close enough for travel | All counties had an advisor at the start | Improve efficiency and program quality through sharing resources across | Leadership team that includes staff, youth and volunteers in program |

| | | | | |
|---|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|---|--|
| | | of the pilot period | counties | planning |
| CCSR | Travel between counties is feasible | Advisors in most counties | Increase opportunities for staff professional development and improve efficiency in program management. | Workgroup strategy with focus on consistency in policy application |
| Initially four counties with two more added later | | | | |

Table 2.
Showing Examples of Cluster Activities and Innovations

| North Coast and Mountain Region Cluster (23 counties) | Central Valley Cluster (4 counties) | Central Coast and Southern Region Cluster (6 counties) |
|--|--|--|
| Monthly conference calls with online presentations featuring guest presenters and program representatives | Opening program activities cluster wide eg. 4-H camp, tractor day, field day | Harmonization of rules and policy interpretation across cluster |
| Training on technology tools and other topics suggested by staff | Creation of a 4-H cluster newsletter | Cluster wide implementation of programs |
| Use of key contact staff among program representatives to provide leadership and facilitate coordination with the cluster coordinator. | Standardized volunteer orientation and training | Staff professional development through monthly trainings on topics presented by advisors |

All three clusters were evaluated for 2 years to test whether county clustering with a coordinator would enhance 4-H program delivery by:

- Increasing opportunities for staff professional development, and building support for and morale of 4-H staff
- Increasing cross county collaboration and reducing inefficiencies through creating new structures of program management

- Enhancing the work of academics through increased opportunities for research and sharing expertise with staff and 4-H clientele

In addition, the evaluation provided information on promising practices and issues in sustaining a new staff structure for the 4-H YDP statewide.

County Clustering in Other States

Several benefits of county clustering have been cited for the Cooperative Extension System, including opportunities to create new programs, enhanced camaraderie and job satisfaction, enhanced program content, and increased efficiency in delivery (Cropper & Merkwitz, 1998; Hutchins, 1992). At the same time, clustering comes with issues, including increased staff time and management functions.

To obtain more recent information, in June 2009, the 4-H Center for Youth Development sent out an online national survey to identify states that had experience with county clustering. Out of 16 states that responded to the survey, five had experienced county clustering (Colorado, Ohio, Montana, Massachusetts, and Minnesota), and two were moving in that direction. These five states reported dwindling staff resources and budgetary constraints as reasons for adopting a cluster model. The model of clustering varied, from county-based cluster administrators, to regional or statewide administrators. In three states, clustering was adopted by all of Cooperative Extension, and for two of the states, it was mainly 4-H and one or more other programs such as nutrition (Subramaniam & Dennery, 2009).

County clustering was perceived to be beneficial for creating more cohesion and consistency, for increasing budgetary efficiencies, and for allowing counties to avail themselves to Extension resources that would be limited in a county-based model. Issues mentioned included the difficulty of transition and acceptance by both staff and clientele. Another mentioned the challenge of having the support of county commissioners for a system that emphasized cross-county collaboration and resource sharing. Clustering may result in transitioning to a less hands-on approach with volunteers because a greater geographic area is covered or increasing travel time for personnel within a cluster, although the use of technology was mentioned as possibly addressing this latter point.

Method

The 4-H Pilot Leadership Plan was evaluated by the 4-H Center for Youth Development. The evaluation followed a comparative case study approach (Gerring, 2005), which enabled the evaluation team to track progress in each cluster while identifying common trends and variations between the clusters. Evaluators attended all meetings of the implementation team (the three academic coordinators along with the State 4-H director and associate director). Formative, utilization-focused evaluation informed the implementation throughout (Patton, 1999). Evaluators also attended cluster meetings whenever possible.

Evaluation Questions

The following questions guided the evaluation throughout the study.

I. How does county clustering with a cluster coordinator work to:

- i. Increase communication and consistency across clusters and statewide
- ii. Increase level of support, competence and job satisfaction of 4-H program representatives
- iii. Increase cross-county collaboration for reduced duplication and increased efficiency
- iv. Increase opportunities for advisors to conduct cluster or state level research, evaluation and training
- v. Benefit volunteers and programs

II. What are additional insights that inform successful county clustering with a coordinator role?

Data

Data that informed findings were from:

- Telephone interviews with 60 staff participants at the end of Year 1. These involved open-ended questions regarding impressions of the pilot, perceived roles of the academic coordinator, county needs, and impacts at the end of the first year.
- Surveys from cluster personnel: 31 program representatives (response rate = 100%); eight out of nine advisors (response rate= 88%); and 20 out of 27 county directors (response rate = 74%).
- The questions to program representatives explored changes in professional development, support received, use of resources, impact on 4-H program and volunteers, and overall impressions. Parallel questions for advisors and county directors included their current level of support of the pilot and the work of the academic coordinator, impacts observed for their program representative and for the 4-H program, and overall impressions.
- Observations of cluster events.
- Interviews with cluster coordinators and state office personnel.

Analysis

Quantitative data gathered through surveys were analyzed using SPSS (SPSS Inc, Chicago, IL). T-tests were conducted to see whether retrospective pre-post survey responses indicated significant changes in the following:

- Program representative professional development, support received, use of resources, and perceived impact on programs and volunteers.
- Communication, consistency, and efficiency in programming
- Perceptions of county clustering from advisors and county directors.

Qualitative interview data was coded using QSR International's NVIVO 8 qualitative analysis software, by two research personnel. Codes were compared and consolidated through a consensus process. Codes were generated that were relevant to the desired objectives, as well as staff perceptions on working relationships and roles of different personnel in the cluster.

Findings

The following section describes how county clustering with cluster coordination met the desired objectives.

How County Clustering Worked to Meet Anticipated Outcomes

County clustering had the following impacts for staff and programs.

Increased Staff Support

County clustering clearly benefits program representatives who have the task of running the day-to-day 4-H administrative and program operations. A majority (94%) felt participating in a cluster with a coordinator had been beneficial to them. A significant majority ($p < .01$) reported increased job satisfaction, confidence and perceived support (Table 3 and Figure 1). Quotes from program staff also confirm the quantitative information (Table 4).

Table 3.
Utilization of the Services Provided by the Cluster Coordinator

| In my cluster, the cluster coordinator has | Frequency and percentage (n=31) |
|---|--|
| Facilitated access to training relevant to my work | 27 (87%) |
| Increased my access to curricula and other resources | 21(68%) |
| Helped with policy interpretation | 16 (48%) |
| Helped resolve a program related issue I faced | 10 (32%) |
| Provided other support (tech tools training, moral support, personal training, quick response time) | 12 (37%) |

Figure 1.

Showing the Increase in Job Satisfaction, Confidence as a Youth Development Professional and Perceived Level of Support of Program Representatives (n=31)

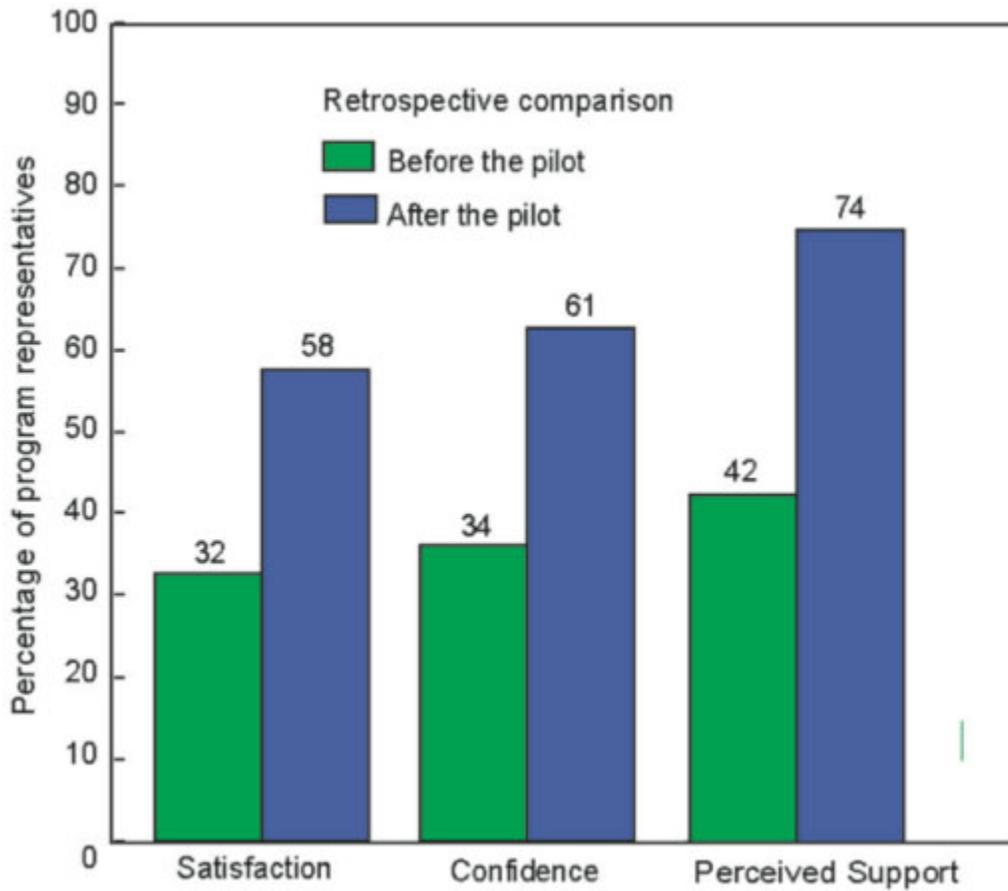


Table 4.

Sharing Quotes on How County Clustering Supports Program Staff

| How county clustering supports staff |
|---|
| <i>"I feel better supported - (it) has given me more confidence, and I am better informed and educated in Youth Development." - Program Representative</i> |
| <i>"Since the Pilot, my comfort level has increased as far as approaching staff and advisors from other counties and asking for help." - Program Representative</i> |
| <i>"I have more information and resources to offer volunteers." - Program Representative</i> |

| |
|---|
| <i>"It is nice to know how other program reps resolve issues." - Program Representative</i> |
|---|

| |
|--|
| <i>"I really felt alone and the State Office was so busy at times. Now I have all the other program reps to talk to in addition to having our cluster coordinator." - Program Representative</i> |
|--|

| |
|--|
| <i>"Without the academic coordinator's support, guidance and training we might be looking for another program representative by now. The Pilot provides needed training and resources and much needed moral support" - County Director</i> |
|--|

How did the cluster model affect academics, i.e., the advisors and county directors? Slightly more than half within clusters had positive overall impressions (five out of eight advisors and 11 out of 20 county directors). Responses were mixed with respect to the positive impact on advisor work. It seems while county clustering did not immediately release academics' time involved for managerial duties and promote their productivity as anticipated, it did provide significant support for about half of the advisors and county directors. To quote one county director, "Without it there would be a different county director and no 4-H program in (my county)." Advisors who shared a positive attitude about county clustering played an integral role in cluster level planning and were involved as a team in training their program representatives as well as in undertaking program evaluation on a cluster-wide programming level. For those advisors who were peripherally involved, the project was generally seen as something for program representatives, with minimum advisor involvement. Comments from advisors and county directors about how county clustering with a coordinator supported their work are shared in Table 5.

Table 5.

How County Clustering Affects Advisors and County Directors

| |
|--|
| Comments from advisors and county directors on how county clustering supported their work |
|--|

| |
|--|
| <i>"I think that the best support (the Pilot) offers is that it provides communication of new ideas and best utilizes the expertise of all the staff. It also helps reduce duplication of effort." - 4-H Youth Development Advisor</i> |
|--|

| |
|--|
| <i>"It provides opportunities for multi-county work" – 4-H Youth Development Advisor</i> |
|--|

| |
|--|
| <i>"(The Pilot supports) by providing solid professional development to the 4-H program representatives" – 4-H Youth Development Advisor</i> |
|--|

Increased Communication and Program Consistency

There were three areas where county clustering with coordinators had an impact on the flow of

communication: i) among program representatives in cluster counties, ii) between counties and the state office mediated by the cluster coordinator, and iii) between cluster coordinators and the state office. Increased communication has led to greater consistency in program implementation.

Forty-eight percent (48%) of program representatives reported increase in communication with their peers. The Acting Director agreed that the Pilot had enhanced communication between the state 4-H office and the counties through the regular communication with the coordinators. While a majority of the program representatives reported contacting the State 4-H YDP Office on policy questions, over 60% also kept the coordinators in the loop about the communication. Nineteen percent (19%) of program representatives felt that communication with the State 4-H Office had been enhanced. Consistency in policy interpretation showed a significant improvement ($p < .01$), with 87% of program representatives indicating that policy was consistent in cluster counties now, compared to 61% who said it was consistent before the Pilot. The Acting Director of the California 4-H YDP had this to say,

I think it's working very well with the three coordinators. I even, formally and informally use them for feedback. I think ultimately, having a person in those roles would be a huge improvement in our communication, because the person then could take that information, and then tailor it (for program reps), which is very, very critical. So I see this new structure as really being a great opportunity to improve the communications.

Positive Impact on Program Quality and Efficiency

Of Program Representatives, 24 out of 31 reported that participating in the pilot had a positive impact for the 4-H program in their county. A majority noted that this was due to the increase in their own capacity, confidence, knowledge, and access to resources. Other stated benefits included increased cost savings through reduced redundancies (for example, one cluster saved \$2400 in staff time by starting a cluster newsletter that replaced the individual county newsletters). Table 6 shares quotes on benefits of the pilot to the program overall.

Table 6.
Benefits of the Pilot to the Program

| Quotes from personnel about benefits for program |
|---|
| <i>"The biggest impact is that we are coordinating events. We are also looking to strengthen leader training and have policies the same across the cluster, which will make it easier when members and leaders move across county lines." – 4-H Youth Development Advisor</i> |
| <i>"As I feel more confident and gain expertise as a result of training, my whole county benefits. I am a stronger program rep." – Program Representative</i> |
| <i>"Prior to the Pilot, there were many boundaries which weren't to be crossed. Now we coordinate volunteer training and cross enroll youth and leaders. We also have good relationships with the other program reps" – Program</i> |

Representative

"It has helped to standardize some aspects of the program." – County Director

"I like the structure and think the role has evolved to become a critical element of the 4-H staffing structure. It has been helpful to providing training, information and resources to the counties." - 4-H YD Advisor

What Worked? Cluster Innovations and Promising Practice

The following promising practices were observed.

Cluster Team Building

Cluster coordinators worked to build relationships within the team. This was an integral part of optimum group functioning, after decades of many county staff working in isolation. Trust that everyone was gaining something out of collaboration had to be established.

Full Use of Technology

Whenever possible, the North Coast and Mountain Region (NCRM) used technology in the form of online meetings conducted through Adobe Connect, as well as other UCCE tech tools for virtual communications. Staff were trained to develop their technology skills, including creating and hosting their own online meetings. Many staff have been able to transfer these skills in their communications with other staff and with county clientele. The large geographical area of the NCRM region compelled staff to examine which meetings and trainings were better served by meeting face-to-face and which could be served virtually.

Focus on Staff Capacity Building

The focus on staff capacity building filled a gap in professional development. Staff professional development emphasized peer sharing and peer leadership processes. Prior to the pilot, the NCRM was divided into three geographic sub-regions. As a result, three key program representative staff contacts were identified and trained to provide streamlined communication between the coordinator and other representatives.

Cluster-Level Issues Identification

Clusters identified issues at the cluster rather than county level using different methods, such as informal dialogue through retreats or through needs assessment surveys. Generally, counties found common issues that they would like to work on together to strengthen the program. In the Central Valley Region cluster (CVR), youth and volunteers helped determine the needs for their programs.

Use of Advisors for Expertise and Training

While advisor specialization has not occurred in a formal way, cluster coordinators invited advisors

to their cluster meetings as trainers both from within and outside their cluster groups. This enhanced the role of advisors as experts in their academic specialty areas.

Cluster Coordinators Working as a Team with the State Office.

Regular communication between the cluster coordinators and the state office ensured cross-pollination of ideas and also a mechanism for the rapid diffusion of innovation.

What Were the Main Issues Experienced?

The following issues were revealed through the interviews with staff in the first year as well as surveys at the end of Year 2.

Time

In the beginning, while the clusters were being established, both program representatives and advisors felt participation in cluster meetings created an additional burden on their resources already prioritized for their county work. However, time for travel was not mentioned as an issue by staff in the cluster that was using technology to the maximum.

Structural Issues

This included having part-time rather than full-time program representative positions in some counties. These differences caused issues of equity within clusters because some counties felt they were less able to participate in cluster activities as other counties that had full-time personnel.

Role Clarification

Much of the initial part of the project was expended on determining and clarifying the coordinators' roles and boundaries. Even after this period, there were some ambiguities about the line of authority or communication lines for certain issues, such as supervision and personnel issues.

Initial Skepticism About the Plan

Personnel attitudes about the benefit of county clustering were mixed at the onset. One county director expressed, "Unless the coordinator is able to provide significant support to the club program in counties where there are no advisors, the role is inadequate." Another felt this way, "I see the new staffing structure as a band-aid. The coordinator is spread too thin."

Discussion

Based on insights from the 2 years of evaluating the cluster process, California 4-H's Pilot Leadership Team put forth recommendations to continue county clustering throughout the state (Subramaniam & Denney, 2009). The evaluation provided evidence that county clustering has benefits when executed in a thoughtful way.

The following benefits cited were similar to those cited in other states: reduced isolation for staff,

increased staff competency, and increased program efficiency (Hutchins, 1992). Clearly, county clustering with a coordinator has been beneficial for staff. This staffing model empowers program representatives to grow in their competencies as youth development professionals and ultimately improve the quality of programming.

In California, county clustering was mixed for advisors and county directors. Other states have found benefits from clustering, especially when they go hand in hand with agent specialization (Cropper & Merkwitz, 1998), such as the idea of increasing the managerial role and capacity of field staff with academic personnel increasingly engaged in research and specialized roles. However, issues related to streamlining the role of academics seems to be more complex than anticipated. This may be because academics see their role as not only relating to administrative/managerial decision-making, but also as essential relationship building at the county level. The shift in staffing has to come with a change in mindset regarding county-based activities and encompass a more expanded vision on the part of academics to serve at a cluster or statewide level.

While other states have mentioned greater efficiencies in cross-county collaboration (Hutchins, 1992), we observed increased communication and policy consistency at a statewide level that may be attributed to the statewide team of cluster coordinators. While other states have reported having some form of coordination, published work has not suggested that these coordinators worked together as a team. We believe this to be a promising practice in cluster staffing formats that allows the efficient diffusion and adoption of new innovations that come out of the cluster process (Greenhalgh, 1998).

With respect to the issues of county clustering, other states have noted issues with increased travel time. The NCMR embraced technology (note, this is a largely rural region) and paved the way for the entire state to increase use of online meetings and trainings, reducing travel time for conferences and other events. This increased the viability of clustering approaches for the way communication is used and adopted by both staff and clientele and aligns with current thinking on the use of technology for extension programming (Harriman & Daugherty, 1992).

Finally, the California 4-H clusters experience is very much in line with the other states that have mentioned that one of the challenges of county clustering is transitioning into a new staffing structure itself (Subramaniam & Dennery, 2009). While a majority of staff were optimistic and support a new model of staffing, almost half of the county directors and advisors did not see the pilot as beneficial. Inconsistent buy-in for the process at the onset may explain some of this. It is also possible that 2 years may not be long enough to determine the effects of such a transition. As identified in other states, the transition into a new staffing structure takes time and willingness on the part of all concerned to adopt and embrace a new way of operating (Patterson, 1998). Based on the insights gained, we offer the following guidelines for states embarking on county clustering approaches.

- Ensure that there is buy-in, through identifying a common vision or need for all counties in the cluster.
- Clarify the role of the cluster coordinator with all personnel in the cluster. Gain consensus on role expectations.
- Ensure frequent communication among cluster personnel and the central state leadership and

administration—build a team of cluster coordinators.

- Ensure that cluster coordinators serve on statewide committees to serve as interpreters of policy and answer program-related questions effectively.
- Focus on program representative capacity building if there is a need in this area.
- Use available technology for communication whenever possible and appropriate. Establish systems for staff to communicate with each other.
- Engage advisors in planning and contributing to cluster level activities (research, evaluation, training, and program development).

Conclusion

An evaluation of county clustering in California 4-H provided additional evidence that this can be an effective approach for Extension, especially in times of economic constraints. Further experience and documentation is needed on how to navigate the issues and create a smoother transition for states that are moving in this direction.

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