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Teaching Leadership and Communications Skills and Responsibilities: A Comparison of 4-H and other Youth Organizations

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Abstract: This article compares 4-H and other youth organizations in helping youth to learn skills such as leadership, communications, and challenges and responsibilities. One-hundred fifty-eight former 4-H members who were also members of other youth organizations provided data for the study. More than one-half of former members indicated that 4-H was "more helpful" than other youth organizations in teaching skills relative to leadership and communications skills and responsibilities. Findings suggest that youth organizations, especially 4-H, have worth in that they help prepare youth to be responsible and contributing members of society.

Introduction

An abundance of literature exists relative to youth organizations in the United States. Floyd and McKenna (2003) reported that youth organizations such as 4-H, Big Brothers and Big Sisters of America, Boy Scouts of America, Boys and Girls Clubs of America, Future Farmers of America, Girl Scouts of the USA, National Crime Prevention Council, Save the Children USA, and Communities in Schools have a long and storied history of promoting positive development in America's youth. They also indicated that 4-H stands as a leader in the sphere of youth-serving organizations. 4-H touches the lives of over 6.8 million youth and is enriched by the selfless commitment of nearly 500,000 volunteer leaders and over 116,000 volunteer youth leaders. 4-H is also supported by the experience of thousands of dedicated professional youth development workers. There are over 340,000 club units divided into organized clubs (103,603), special-interest programs (90,244), overnight camping programs (9,905), school enrichment programs (131,912), and school-aged child care programs (5,206). (p.17).

Other researchers have made attempts to compare 4-H and other youth organizations (Astroth & Haynes, 2002; Goodwin, et al., 2005; Canadian 4-H Council, 2003; & Maass, Wilken, Jordan, Culen, & Place, 2006).

Consensus from these studies suggest that youth enrolled in 4-H programs do better in school, develop leadership skills, and help others in communities than those enrolled in other youth organizations. In addition, findings from these studies suggest that youth even after leaving 4-H continue to engage in leadership and community related activities than those in other youth organizations.

Astroth and Haynes (2002) compared Montana 4-H members and non-members. They found that 4-H members were more involved in projects than non-members (78% vs. 48%, respectively). Similarly, 4-H members contributed more (76%) money/time to charity than non-members (76% vs. 52% respectively). Further, 4-H members were more likely to have a conversation with an adult (65% vs. 49% respectively) than non-members. Regardless of being a 4-H member or a non-member, they helped poor, sick and hungry people.

A study comparing 4-H and non 4-H members in Idaho was conducted by Goodwin, et al. (2005). Specifically, at-risk behaviors such as cheating on a test, alcohol use, shop lifting, drug use, smoking, etc., were examined. School performance, community participation, and leadership roles were also examined. Findings revealed that 4-H members were less likely to exhibit these at-risk behaviors than non 4-H members. Regarding school performance, 4-H members were more likely to succeed in school, help others within their communities, participate in leadership activities, and hold leadership positions such as secretary, committee chair, etc. Goodwin, et al (2005) argued for increased awareness of 4-H programs at the local and state level.

Mass and colleagues (2006), using a cross-sectional, quasi-experimental design, compared the influence of 4-H programs to other youth development organizations on the development of 36 life skills. They sampled high-achieving 4-H alumni in Oklahoma who participated in programs between 1969 and 1998. Findings revealed that the 4-H influence was evident on majority of life skills. The top five life skills most influenced by participating in 4-H programs were public speaking, community service volunteering, self-discipline, self-responsibility, and teamwork. However, other organizations also had some influence on the development of different life skills. Participation in other youth programs also influenced development of character, self-discipline, accepting differences, cooperation, and social skills. They recommended enhancing 4-H programming through the development of collaborations with other youth development organizations.

Teaching youth to learn and develop life and leadership skills is very essential. Such developments have been accomplished through a number of programs by 4-H and other youth development organizations. It is therefore imperative to assess the contributions of 4-H and other youth development programs on leadership development, communications, and teaching responsibilities.

Purpose and Objectives

The overall purpose of the study was to compare perceptions of 4-H alumni on their experiences in 4-H and other youth organizations in helping youth to learn skills such as leadership, communications, and responsibilities. The following specific objectives guided the study.

1. Describe the demographic profile of 4-H alumni
2. Determine 4-Hers membership in other youth serving organizations
3. Determine perceptions of 4-H alumni regarding leadership, communications and responsibilities learned in 4-H

4. Compare 4-H experiences with other youth organizations regarding leadership, and communications skills and responsibilities learned.

Methodology

The data for the descriptive study reported here came from a larger study entitled "Influence of 4-H programs on youth, families and communities." The population for the study included all 4-H alumni (N=1,254) listed in the 4-H Alumni Database maintained in the Department of Agricultural and Extension Education at Penn State. A random sample of 289 alumni was chosen for the study. This sample size reflects a 5% margin of error with a 5% risk of drawing a bad sample (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970).

A four-section questionnaire was developed to collect data for the study. Section one elicited 4-H program information, while section two contained statements using Likert scales that measured contribution of 4-H experiences in learning leadership and communications skills and responsibilities. Section three contained statements comparing 4-H program and other youth programs using three anchors: 1) "4-H most helpful," 2) "other programs were most helpful," and 3) "programs about the same." The final section consisted of items that elicited select demographic characteristics.

A panel of five experts (two agricultural and Extension education faculty, the Extension program leader for youth, children, and families, a 4-H program coordinator, and a graduate assistant) judged the questionnaire for content and face validity. A pilot test was conducted using collegiate 4-H members to estimate the reliability. All the sections of the questionnaire had acceptable reliability. Cronbach's alpha for the final study ranged from 0.89 (Communication) to .93 (Leadership).

Data were collected using a mail survey and followed procedures suggested by Dillman (2000). After two follow-ups and a post card reminder, a total of 178 former 4-H members had responded (61%). Of these, 168 (58%) provided complete and useful data. Of the 168 who provided useful data, only 156 were members of other youth organizations. Therefore, the 12 former 4-H members who were not members of other youth organizations were not included in the data analysis. Early and late respondents were compared as per procedures suggested by Miller and Smith (1983). No differences were found between early and late respondents and thus the study findings can be generalized to the population. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze and summarize the data.

Results

Objective 1: Demographic Profile

Of the 156 4-H members 4-H alumni included in the study, the majority were female (74%); 23% had completed high school; 27% had completed some college; 30% had Bachelor's degrees; and 16% had graduate degrees (Master's and doctoral). The average age was 47.6 years. Regarding 4-H participation, 82% had joined 4-H before age 12 and had participated in 4-H an average of 8.5 years. Seventy-nine percent had held officer positions. On average, they had completed 23 projects, with a minimum of three and a maximum of 100 projects. Three out of every four reported that they had to leave 4-H because of age limitations, while 25% left 4-H while they were still eligible to participate.

Objective 2: 4-H members Membership in Other Youth Organizations

Respondents were asked to indicate from a list of youth organizations the other youth organizations they were members of while they were in 4-H. Organizations included Boys and Girl Scouts, Church Groups, YMCA, Community Sports Clubs, and Young Farmers. Church Youth Groups (57%), followed by School-Sponsored Clubs account for over 50% of the membership. Table 1 presents the details of membership of 4-Hers in other youth development organizations.

Table 1.
Membership of 4-H Members in Other Youth Development Organizations

Organization	Frequency	Percent
Church Youth Groups	73%	57%
School-Sponsored Clubs	72	56
Boy Scouts	37	29
Community Sport Clubs	31	35
Junior/Young Farmers	14	22
YMCA	6	8
Arm/Navy/Air Force	2	2
Boys and Girls Clubs	1	1

Objective 3: Perceptions of 4-H Alumni Regarding Leadership, Communications Skills and Responsibilities Learned in 4-H

On a seven-point scale (1 "no contribution" to 7 "great contribution"), alumni were asked to indicate the extent to which the experiences they had in 4-H contributed to learning leadership and communications skills. Means and standard deviations for these experiences are presented in Tables 2 and 3.

Regarding leadership development, alumni felt that their 4-H experiences greatly contributed to developing group interaction skills ($M=5.71$, $SD=1.31$), acquiring leadership skills ($M=5.67$, $SD=1.59$), and acquiring decision-making skills ($M=5.67$, $SD=1.21$). However, experiences such as business management and developing entrepreneurial skills contributed "somewhat" to learning leadership skills (Table 2).

Table 2.
Means and Standard Deviations for 4-H Experiences Contributing to Leadership Development

Statement	<i>n</i>	<i>M*</i>	<i>SD</i>
Developing entrepreneurial skills	149	4.66	1.82
Acquiring teamwork skills	150	5.63	1.36

Acquiring skills for leadership	150	5.69	1.57
Building leadership skills	150	5.67	1.59
Developing decision making skills	150	5.67	1.21
Building group interaction skills	151	5.71	1.31
*Mean computed on a scale 1(no contribution) to 7(great contribution)			

Regarding communications skills, alumni indicated that developing a sense of personal responsibility ($M=5.92$, $SD=1.15$), acquiring interpersonal skills ($M=5.14$, $SD=1.50$), and interpersonal communication skills ($M=5.25$, $SD=1.58$) contributed "greatly" to learning communications skills. Developing debating skills ($M=3.78$) and technology skills ($M=3.90$) contributed "somewhat" to learning communications skills (Table 3).

Table 3.

Means and Standard Deviations for 4-H Experiences Contributing to Communication Skills

Statement	<i>n</i>	<i>M*</i>	<i>SD</i>
Developing debating skills	148	3.78	1.83
Acquiring interpersonal skills	147	5.14	1.50
Developing public speaking skills	149	4.73	2.00
Interpersonal communication-listening, speaking, talking	147	5.25	1.58
Developing technology skills	146	3.90	1.96
Developing a sense of personal responsibility	148	5.92	1.15
*Mean computed on a scale 1(no contribution) to 7(great contribution)			

4-H alumni were asked to indicate on a scale of one to five, with 1 being "never" and 5 being "very often," the responsibilities experienced in 4-H. Results are shown in Table 4. 4-H alumni indicated that they "often" received help and encouragement from home ($M=4.32$, $SD=0.86$), had the opportunity for developing their own skills ($M=4.26$, $SD=0.76$), felt they were making contribution to 4-H ($M=4.07$, $SD=0.88$), and completed challenging tasks ($M=3.81$, $SD=0.86$). 4-H alumni "somewhat" experienced working in service learning projects ($M=3.28$, $SD=1.22$) and giving public speeches ($M=2.81$, $SD=1.32$).

Table 4.

Responsibilities Experienced in 4-H

Statement	<i>n</i>	<i>M*</i>	<i>SD</i>
Completing challenging tasks	150	3.81	0.86
Making important decisions	150	3.73	0.97

Planning 4-H activities	150	3.63	1.14
Opportunity to develop your own skills	149	4.26	0.76
Made to feel you were making a contribution	151	4.10	0.83
Opportunity to lead others	150	3.81	1.11
Received help and encouragement from home	151	4.32	0.86
Worked in community service projects	150	3.28	1.22
Required to give public speech	151	2.81	1.32
*Mean computed on a scale 1(never) to 5 (very often)			

Objective 4: Comparing 4-H Experiences with Other Youth Organizations

Alumni were asked to indicate membership in other youth organizations while they were in 4-H. Of the 168 alumni who responded, 12 were not members of any other youth organizations while they were in 4-H. As a result, only 156 (168 minus 12) were included in the analysis to address objective 4. In addition to being 4-H members, alumni indicated that they were also members in other youth organizations such as Boy and Girl Scouts, Church Groups, Youth Groups, YMCA, Community Sports Clubs, and Young Farmers, etc. 4-H alumni were asked to indicate the youth program that was most helpful. As shown in Table 5, more than one-half of alumni indicated that 4-H was "most helpful" in learning leadership development (57%), responsibilities (61%), and communication skills (53%).

Table 5.
Comparison of 4-H with Other Youth Organizations (n=156)

Item	Other Youth Programs Most Helpful (%)	Programs About the Same (%)	4-H Most Helpful (%)
Leadership development	12	31	57
Communication skills	7	40	53
Learning responsibilities	9	30	61

One-way analysis of variance was used to determine differences, if any, between youth organizations being helpful in learning leadership and communications skills and responsibilities. Results of ANOVA are presented in Tables 6 through 8. ANOVA results revealed significant differences between membership in youth organizations and learning leadership skills ($F=21.1$, $df=2$, $p < .001$) and communications skills ($F=15.94$, $df=2$, $p < .001$) and preparing for responsibilities in life ($F=26.87$, $df=2$, $p < .001$). For all these skills, former 4-H members rated 4-H as "most helpful."

Table 6.

ANOVA Table for Comparing 4-H Program and Other Youth Programs Regarding Leadership Skills

Group	<i>n</i>	<i>M*</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Other youth programs are more helpful	16	25.06A	8.83		
About the same as 4-H	41	32.12B	7.72		
4-H is more helpful	77	36.10B	4.91		
Total	134	33.56	7.32		
Source	SS	df	MS	F	Sig
Between groups	1738.399	2	869.199	21.108	<0.001
Within groups	5394.497	131	41.179		
Total	7132.896	133			
*Mean computed on a scale 1(no contribution) to 7(great contribution) Mean could range from a low of 6 to a high of 42 with a theoretical midpoint of 24 Means followed by same alphabet are not significantly different					

Table 7.

ANOVA Table for Comparing 4-H Program and Other Youth Programs Regarding Communications Skills

Group	<i>n</i>	<i>M*</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Other youth programs are more helpful	10	18.4A	8.33		
About the same as 4-H	51	28.76B	6.78		
4-H is more helpful	69	31.68B	7.07		
Total	130	29.51	7.83		
Source	SS	df	MS	F	Sig
Between groups	1587.907	2	793.95	15.943	<0.001
Within groups	6324.562	127	49.80		
Total	7912.469	129			
*Mean computed on a scale 1(no contribution) to 7(great contribution) Mean could range from a low of 6 to a high of 42 with a theoretical midpoint of 24 Means followed by same alphabet are not significantly different					

Table 8.

ANOVA Table for Comparing 4-H Program and Other Youth Programs Regarding Responsibilities

Group	<i>n</i>	<i>M*</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Other youth programs are more helpful	12	25.50A	4.96		
About the same as 4-H	41	31.41B	5.34		
4-H is more helpful	84	36.71B	5.98		
Total	137	34.14	6.71		
Source	SS	df	MS	F	Sig
Between	1756.986	2	878.493	26.876	<0.001
Within	4380.094	134	32.687		
Total	6137.080	136			
*Mean computed on a scale 1(never) to 5(very often) Mean could range from a low of 9 to a high of 45 with a theoretical midpoint of 27 Means followed by same alphabet are not significantly different					

Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall, it appears that participation in 4-H projects and activities, and other experiences alumni had in 4-H contributed to learning leadership and communication skills and in preparing them for responsibilities. By participating in 4-H programs and activities, alumni believe that they learned many day-to-day skills, values, and responsibilities. These results support findings of earlier studies reported in the literature (Collins & Associates, 1997; Boyd, Herring, & Briers, 1992; Astroth & Haynes, 2002; Radhakrishna & Sinasky, 2006; Maass et al. 2006; Mckinley, 1999).

Former 4-H members believe that 4-H is a helpful organization when compared to other youth organizations. They view 4-H as the most helpful organization/program in teaching leadership and communications skills and in teaching challenges and responsibilities. This finding support the observations made by Sarver, Johnson, and Verma (2000), who indicated that youth organizations, especially 4-H programs, had worth in that they help prepare youth to be contributing members of society, provide family support, and satisfy developmental needs of youth.

The last decade has witnessed dramatic decline in 4-H enrollment in the United States, and Pennsylvania is no exception. For example, 4-H enrollment in Pennsylvania declined from 104,000 in 2002-03 to 93,000 in 2003-04 (Radhakrishna, Everhart, & Sinasky, 2004) to 91,233 in 2005-06 (Everhart, Personal Communication, August 3, 2007). The findings of the study reported here can be of immense value in increasing 4-H enrollment in the coming years. Extension educators, program leaders, and administrators should capitalize on the positive assessment of 4-H by alumni and use this positive assessment to advertise and market 4-H programs throughout their states.

In a time of budget constraints, the impact and value of Extension programs, especially 4-H programs and activities, should be documented. These impact results should be communicated to key stakeholders for better understanding of the differences that 4-H makes on young people that carry into adulthood.

Four sets of recommendations are offered based on the findings of the study reported here. These recommendations focus on the following: 4-H programming at the local and state level, Extension administration, 4-H alumni, and further research.

For 4-H Programming

- Use the findings of the study to market 4-H programs.
- Examine key findings for program improvement.
- Identify changes needed in 4-H projects and/or develop new projects that influence youth to remain in 4-H
- Use 4-H alumni as ambassadors in each county to market 4-H programs

For Extension Administration

- Communicate major findings to garner support from key stakeholders
- Commit resources to conduct, disseminate, and market 4-H programs
- Develop a strategy and a plan to identify former 4-Hers to serve as ambassadors

For 4-H Alumni

- Explain to youth what a difference 4-H makes
- Spread the word on 4-H experience to friends and families
- Serve as volunteers to continue the rich 4-H tradition and excellence

For Further Research

- Compare 4-H and other youth organizations relative to life skills development
- Replicate the study using FFA and other youth organizations

Periodic assessments of former 4-H members should be documented to determine changes that are taking place in the lives of former 4-H members. Results of such assessments will be of great value to improve future 4-H program offerings. In addition, results of such assessments should be examined on a regional/county basis so that programs specific to regions/counties are developed and delivered.

The findings of the study reported here should be shared with Extension educators in the counties, county Extension directors, regional directors, and Extension administrators to help them make informed decision about the 4-H program and its future directions.

Caution is advised in interpreting findings and conclusions of the study. As indicated in the article, this study compared perceptions of 4-H alumni regarding their experiences in 4-H versus other youth organizations. Future researchers engaged in this line of work should compare 4-H members and non-members and 4-Hers who only participated in 4-H versus 4-Hers who were also involved in other youth organizations. Such comparisons will provide stronger evidence of 4-H impact on youth and their later life experiences.

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