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4-H—Going Beyond Life Skill Development

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Abstract: The investment of tax dollars means 4-H must distinguish itself from its youth-development peers. Such an argument can be developed by examining organizational research, the historical contributions and tradition of 4-H, and the contributions of the modern 4-H program. Although the context of 4-H has broadened beyond food production, it continues to contribute positively to the development of the U.S. economy. Extension's challenge is to prove 4-H's worth by demonstrating a clear return-on-investment to stakeholders. Doing so may be exactly what is required to justify the continuation of public funds.

States are facing their worst budget cuts in decades (Luhby, 2008). As budgets continue to tighten, justifying the use of public funds becomes even more difficult. 4-H is one of many youth-serving organizations in the United States. However, it is one of few with employees directly funded by tax dollars. The investment of tax dollars means 4-H must distinguish itself from its youth-development peers. Such an argument can be developed by examining organizational research, the historical contributions and tradition of 4-H, and the contributions of the modern 4-H program.

Impacts on Youth

To justify the use of public tax dollars for 4-H, it is helpful to begin by comparing the demonstrated impact 4-H has had on its members with impacts from other youth-serving organizations. Impact studies from Montana (Astroth & Haynes, 2002), Idaho (Goodwin et al., 2005), and Colorado (Goodwin, Carroll, & Oliver, 2007) offer detailed information regarding 4-H participant success. The results showed 4-H members had enhanced decision-making skills, higher scholastic achievement, improved relationships with adults, and a more positive outlook on life and the world around them than youth not enrolled in 4-H. 4-H youth were more likely to demonstrate life skills than their peers (Goodwin et al., 2007).

Former Boy Scouts attributed their development of positive character traits such as being a good team player, always being honest, taking better care of the environment, respecting the life and property of others, having pride in their country, respecting the elderly, and having confidence in their abilities to their participation (Boy Scouts of America Youth and Family Research Center, 2005). Senior Girl Scouts reported a higher

level of experience in regards to leadership, respect for others, feelings of belonging, and values/decision making through their troop activities than through school (Hwalek & Minnick, 1997). Younger members reported similar outcomes.

A national Harris survey of Boys and Girls Clubs' alumni examined the effects adult club staff had on members over time (Boys and Girls Club, 2007). The Boys and Girls Club staff had a positive effect on a member's character development. Sixty-seven percent of surveyed club alumni identified the Boys and Girls Club as the place they learned to say no to drugs and alcohol. Also, 85% of the alumni felt Boys and Girls Club staff member had made a positive difference in their knowing right from wrong (Boys and Girls Club, 2007).

Decision makers and funders are heavily influenced by these reports when reviewing and making decisions regarding financial support (Kabes, 1991). 4-H has done an outstanding job of showing it is at the forefront of life skill development, but 4-H has not emphasized what makes it stand out. All four organizations have made positive impacts on youth and appear to be serving similar audiences. Yet 4-H's historical role in the country's development and the current role it serves to strengthen the U.S. economy sets 4-H apart from its peers.

The Historical Foundations of 4-H

Historically, 4-H has served as a connection between the university and youth in the rural community. Government researchers had trouble getting the farming community to readily accept new agricultural discoveries (Rasmussen, 1989). Through Extension, educators discovered youth were a way to bridge this gap. Youth experienced success by experimenting with new technology and ideas through 4-H. They would then go home to share their newly acquired knowledge and skills. Over time, agricultural practices changed as adults incorporated skills learned from their children.

During the wars, the military and defense industries relied heavily on older youth while their fathers were sent overseas (Rasmussen, 1989). Younger youth stepped into provider roles and assisted significantly with the lack of food through 4-H's victory gardens and production oriented projects. In 1942, Texas 4-H clubs produced enough food to feed 17,000 military personnel (Rasmussen, 1989).

Following the war, Extension programs continued to have an agricultural focus. Peters (1999) stated "while there is a significant (and growing) degree of confusion and debate over exactly what Extension's purpose is or should be, over most of the post-World War II period it has mainly been viewed as a mechanism for advancing the productivity and efficiency of American agriculture" (p. 1). According to Peters, Extension utilized direct educational programming and the disbursement of research-based information in this effort. Peters suggested these methods were "generally centered on economics, not civics, with a sharply limited focus on technical problem solving rather than a broad focus on human and community development" (p. 1). The number of counties having Extension agents tripled during the war period (Rasmussen, 1989). Extension's successful contributions at that time led to its fastest employee expansion to date.

4-H in Modern America

According to the National 4-H Council (2008), today's 4-H program is a community of young people across America who are learning leadership, citizenship, and life skills. While this is a solid vision statement, it fails to clearly define 4-H as economically grounded. Accountability efforts must provide evidence of economic output to convince taxpayers and lawmakers there is a tangible return on the public investment. 4-H has programs contributing to the economy, but those outcomes are mentioned far less often than changes in life

skills. The following programs are clear economic contributors:

- **Workforce Preparation:** 4-H offers projects specifically designed to develop workforce skills, such as Entrepreneurship and Real Money, Real World. Youth learn to manage time and money, organize and maintain information, and apply technology to tasks (Mashburn & Harder, in press). These skills are included in the competencies youth need to become successful employees (U.S. Department of Labor, 1991).
- **Volunteer Training:** 4-H volunteers receive training in youth development, leadership, and technical areas of expertise. Volunteers develop skills by coordinating events, teaching youth, assuming "middle management" positions, balancing budgets, and participating in the democratic decision-making process. Volunteers may apply the skills they have learned from 4-H to their occupations, a positive externality for their employers.
- **4-H SET Initiative:** Developing a future American workforce of scientists, engineers, and technology experts is a national target identified by the U.S. Department of Education (2007). Only 5% of American college graduates earn degrees in these areas compared to 66% in Japan and 59% in China (National 4-H Council, 2008). In an effort to make the American workforce more competitive, the National 4-H Council challenged 4-H agents to prepare one million new young people to excel in science, engineering, and technology by 2013.

Although the context has broadened beyond food production, 4-H continues to contribute positively to the development of the U.S. economy. 4-H workforce development, volunteer training, and the SET initiative are just a few ways 4-H is helping youth and adults become valuable contributors to their communities. Extension's challenge is to prove 4-H's worth by demonstrating a clear return-on-investment to stakeholders. Doing so may be exactly what is required to justify the continuation of public funds.

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