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## An Assessment of 4-H Volunteer Experience: Implications for Building Positive Youth Development Capacity

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# **An Assessment of 4-H Volunteer Experience: Implications for Building Positive Youth Development Capacity**

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**Abstract:** This article explores the important role that volunteers play in the effective delivery of Extension programs. Using an example of positive youth development (PYD) theory from 4-H, the article shows how the success of programs is dependent on volunteer training and support. The article reviews the management, competency, motivation, and satisfaction needs of volunteers and presents results from a statewide study of 4-H volunteers. Four critical areas of volunteer support are explored in light of the study findings: (1) volunteer training and support; (2) sustaining volunteers; (3) volunteer recognition; and (4) program monitoring and evaluation.

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The research base for positive youth development (PYD) has developed significantly in recent years, and current research is revealing the particularly strong influence that the 4-H program has on the positive development of youth across the country (Lerner, 2007). One of the unique aspects of the 4-H program is its reliance on the participation of thousands of adult volunteers who plan and deliver 4-H programs in local communities.

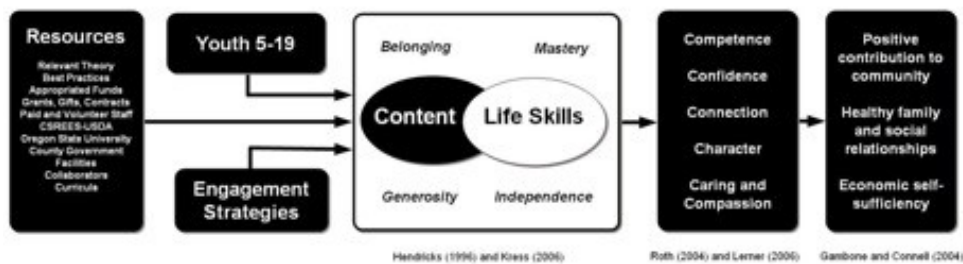
## **A Model for 4-H as a Positive Youth Development Program**

As the field of PYD has developed, so has its theoretical framework. Consequently, 4-H has developed a program model that matches the PYD framework and articulates the elements that are important for the program's success (Figure 1). These elements include: (1) the resources, including volunteers, that make the program possible; (2) the youth who participate and the types of programs in which they are engaged; (3) the program's essential elements, which ensure that programs provide opportunities for belonging, mastery,

independence, and generosity (Kress, 2004); and (4) the content of the programs (think 4-H "project") and the life skills that are developed through learning the content, such as leadership, responsibility, teamwork, etc.

When the aforementioned aspects of the model are in place, a predicted increase in the outcomes of PYD occurs. These important outcomes are commonly known as the five "C's" of PYD: confidence, competence, character, caring, and connection (Lerner & Lerner, 2006; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2004). Developing PYD leads to the long-term outcome of a successful transition to adulthood, marked by positive family and social relationships, economic self-sufficiency, and positive contributions to community.

**Figure 1.**  
4-H Program Model



While county Extension educators are responsible for the overall 4-H program, it is often the volunteers, not trained Extension staff, who work directly with 4-H youth. In fact, there is growing evidence that 4-H educators spend more and more of their time as volunteer managers and less time in actual program delivery. Additionally, according to King and Safrit (1998), the ultimate impact of 4-H programs on youth is dependent on the volunteer management skills of the 4-H educator. Given the important role volunteers play in the ultimate success of building PYD, it is increasingly imperative that volunteers receive effective training in how to plan and deliver 4-H programs with youth.

All 4-H volunteers receive some form of training before assuming the role of 4-H volunteer, but traditionally such training has focused on the nuts and bolts of leading a 4-H club, such as role expectations, risk management, content expertise, and "ages and stages" of youth. Less emphasis has been placed on teaching volunteers about how 4-H operates as a PYD program, why creating a program atmosphere that includes the essential elements is important, and what strategies work best for building PYD outcomes in youth. As 4-H continues to gain understanding of its impact on PYD, it becomes more and more important that volunteers receive training and support in implementing programs that help ensure the PYD aspects of 4-H.

## Volunteer Management, Competency, Motivation, and Satisfaction

While preparing 4-H volunteers to be effective agents of PYD is a recent development, it is important that these efforts build on established knowledge of ensuring volunteer success within organizations. Four specific areas include volunteer management, competency, motivation, & satisfaction.

Several models have been proposed to help frame what is needed to ensure the success of volunteers working in Extension. The ISOTURE model is one that has been disseminated and used widely in Extension (Boyd,

1971). ISOTURE stands for *identification* of the skills needed to be successful; *selection* of appropriate volunteers; *orientation* for new volunteers; *training* to help volunteers attain the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed for success; appropriate *utilization* of volunteer time and effort; *recognition* of volunteer achievement and contributions; and *evaluation* of the volunteers performance and experience. Management models like ISOTURE demonstrate a holistic understanding of the multifaceted aspects of the volunteer role.

In addition to frameworks for volunteer management, considerable work has been done to identify the competencies needed for 4-H volunteers to be effective (Culp, McKee, & Nestor, 2007). Many of these competencies are necessary in order for volunteers to implement 4-H programs in ways that ensure the development of PYD. Some of the most critical competencies include: communication, planning and organizing, subject matter expertise, interpersonal skills, leadership, knowledge of youth development, working well with youth, time management, understanding the organizational structure of 4-H, and Cooperative Extension, group processing, and teaching (Culp, McKee, & Nestor, 2007).

In order to strengthen training and support for volunteers, we must also understand the unique reasons why volunteers become involved. We may like to think that volunteers exist only to help implement programs, but research consistently shows that volunteers have specific needs that motivate their participation in programs like 4-H. Finkelstein (2007) outlined six motivational domains for volunteers, including:

1. The ability to express one's value of giving to others;
2. The ability to learn and develop understanding and skills;
3. Strengthening social relationships;
4. Gaining career-related experience;
5. Reducing negative feelings about oneself;
6. Enhancing oneself psychologically.

According to Finkelstein, the greater one's motivation for and sense of satisfaction from volunteering, the more time a person will give to volunteer efforts. Other factors that affect volunteers' commitment to a program include satisfaction with the organization and its performance, the organization's identity and reputation, satisfaction with the organization's policies and procedures, and the identity associated with their volunteer role (Dorsch, Riemer, Sluth, Paskevich, & Chelladurai, 2002).

When considering why adults volunteer in youth-oriented programs, research indicates four main factors: (1) to help the community; (2) to help others (youth); (3) to help their own children; and (4) for social interaction (Reimer & Dorsch, 2004). Recent inquiry into the role of volunteers in 4-H programs revealed similar findings: 4-H volunteers want to make a difference in the lives of youth and provide a 4-H opportunity for their own children at the same time (White & Arnold, 2003).

Enhancing volunteer experiences and satisfaction is clearly a key element in successful recruitment and retention. In particular, volunteers need to have a positive experience as 4-H volunteers, including feeling

valued and having a positive relationship with 4-H program staff. Volunteers also need to feel satisfied in their role as a volunteer by believing that what they are doing is making a difference and that the 4-H program is meeting important needs. Also, if volunteers are going to implement programs that promote PYD, they need to receive training and support in how to make that happen; county faculty must be purposeful in sharing the PYD framework and helping volunteers better understand how to transform their 4-H club into a more effective PYD program.

Suggesting volunteers be responsible for ensuring that 4-H programs promote PYD is a new idea for many educators. As a result of this novelty and a general desire to assess volunteer satisfaction and experience, a statewide needs assessment was conducted to measure the perceptions of Oregon 4-H volunteers related to their understanding of the 4-H youth development program and the Extension Service, their understanding of their role as a 4-H volunteer, and their satisfaction with their volunteer role.

## Methods

### Participants

The total sample for the study reported here consisted of 2,702 volunteer leaders from 4-H programs in 24 Oregon counties. Each county submitted a list of current volunteers to the State 4-H Office. From this list a random sample of 540 was generated, stratified by counties, with approximately 5% of leaders from each county included in the sample. This sample size was calculated to create a 95% confidence level for avoiding sampling error (Reisman, 2000). The final valid sample for the study was 503, with 37 dropped from the original sample due to inaccurate addresses. Out of the final sample, 175 surveys were returned, resulting in a return rate of 35%.

Eighty-five percent of the participants were female, and 15% were male. The average amount of hours volunteered in a given week for the leaders was 3.75. The maximum time volunteered by participants was 20 hours a week; 1 hour per week was the minimum time volunteered.

Sixty-two percent of participants described themselves as a club project leader, 8% described themselves as a community club leader, 10% as a resource leader, 10% as "other," and 10% listed more than one volunteer role. Volunteers also responded to the number of years they had been involved as a leader (Table 1).

**Table 1.**  
Number of Years as a Volunteer

	2007 First Year	1-3 Years	4-6 Years	7-10 Years	11-15 Years	16-20 Years	20+ Years
Percent Reported	11%	18%	20%	19%	13%	5%	14%

### Instruments

A 23-item questionnaire was developed specifically for the study that targeted three elements: (1) Volunteer satisfaction, which focused on the volunteer's satisfaction with the 4-H program, quality of program materials and information, and quality of interaction with the Extension office (15 items); (2) Volunteer experience, which focused on the volunteer's learning and relationship with the program (six items); and (3)

Understanding of Extension and 4-H. This section contained two items, one asked specifically about PYD learning, and the other asked about understanding the relationship between the county and state 4-H programs. Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with each statement on a 1 to 4 scale as either (1) "strongly disagree;" (2) "disagree;" (3) "agree;" or (4) "strongly agree."

## Procedure

A cover letter, the questionnaire, and a stamped return envelope were mailed to the volunteers in the random sample. Participants were asked to read the cover letter describing the study and to complete the questionnaire and return it directly to the State 4-H Office in the envelope provided. Two follow-up postcards were mailed to non-respondents 2 and 4 weeks following the questionnaire mailing. Questionnaires were returned directly to the State 4-H Office, where they were scanned or hand-entered in SPSS data files for analysis.

## Results

Frequencies of responses (percentages) were calculated for each item under three topics: (1) Volunteer satisfaction; (2) Volunteer experience; and (3) Volunteer understanding. A "total agree" percentage was calculated to indicate the percentage of the respondents who rated the item either "strongly agree" or "agree." Items receiving the highest rating under volunteer satisfaction were "programs are relevant to needs of youth," "county staff returns correspondence in a timely manner," and "information for leaders is unbiased." Percentages for all items related to volunteer satisfaction are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.**  
Frequencies of Responses—Volunteer Satisfaction

	<b>Percent Strongly Agree (4)</b>	<b>Percent Agree (3)</b>	<b>Percent Disagree (2)</b>	<b>Percent Strongly Disagree (1)</b>	<b>Total Agree</b>
Programs are relevant to needs of youth	37.5%	60.1%	1.2%	1.2%	<b>97.6%</b>
County staff returns correspondence in a timely manner	48.8%	44.4%	5.6%	1.2%	<b>93.2%</b>
Information for leaders is unbiased	37.0%	56.2%	3.7%	3.1%	<b>93.2%</b>
4-H meets needs in community	53.6%	38.0%	7.8%	0.6%	<b>91.6%</b>
County staff uses technology to help me in my role	33.8%	56.6%	7.6%	2.1%	<b>90.4%</b>
County staff are friendly and	52.1%	37.1%	8.4%	2.4%	<b>89.2%</b>

courteous					
County agent knows subject matter	46.9%	40.7%	8.0%	4.3%	<b>87.6%</b>
Education materials are high quality	28.6%	58.4%	11.8%	1.2%	<b>87.0%</b>
Agent uses appropriate teaching for leaders	32.9%	53.8%	10.1%	3.2%	<b>86.7%</b>
Information for leaders is easy and understandable	23.8%	62.2%	12.8%	1.2%	<b>86.0%</b>
County office is conveniently located	36.5%	48.5%	10.8%	4.2%	<b>85.0%</b>
Agent provides adequate training for leaders	26.5%	55.6%	13.0%	4.9%	<b>82.1%</b>
Information for leaders is up-to-date and accurate	18.3%	63.4%	15.2%	3.0%	<b>81.7%</b>
Youth are included in planning programs	21.2%	60.3%	15.9%	2.6%	<b>81.5%</b>
4-H known in community	32.1%	48.2%	16.1%	3.6%	<b>80.3%</b>

Of the items related to volunteer experience, "4-H volunteer experience is valuable" received the highest rating. "Feel valued by 4-H youth" and "learned new things because of being a leader" also received high ratings. Percentages for all items related to volunteer experience are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.**  
Frequencies of Responses—Volunteer Experience

	<b>Percent Strongly Agree (4)</b>	<b>Percent Agree (3)</b>	<b>Percent Disagree (2)</b>	<b>Percent Strongly Disagree (1)</b>	<b>Total Agree</b>
4-H volunteer experience is valuable	60.0%	38.2%	1.8%	0.0%	<b>98.2%</b>
Feel valued by 4-H youth	51.2%	44.6%	4.2%	0.0%	<b>95.8%</b>
	39.9%	51.5%	7.4%	1.2%	<b>91.4%</b>

Learned new things because of being a leader					
County staff cares about my needs	38.0%	50.6%	5.1%	6.3%	<b>88.6%</b>
Volunteers are included in planning programs	34.2%	52.9%	11%	1.9%	<b>87.1%</b>
Feel valued by staff in county	37.6%	47.9%	8.5%	6.1%	<b>85.5%</b>

Of the two items related to volunteer understanding, "learned about positive youth development through agent" received a fairly high rating. "Understanding the relationship between state and county programs" received the lowest rating of all items on the questionnaire. Percentages for both items related to volunteer understanding are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4.**  
Frequencies of Responses—Volunteer Understanding

	<b>Percent Strongly Agree (4)</b>	<b>Percent Agree (3)</b>	<b>Percent Disagree (2)</b>	<b>Percent Strongly Disagree (1)</b>	<b>Total Agree</b>
Learned about positive youth development through agent	25.0%	56.3%	14.4%	4.4%	<b>81.3%</b>
Understand relationship between county and state programs	21.3%	49.4%	24.4%	5.0%	<b>70.7%</b>

An analysis for variance (ANOVA) was conducted to determine any mean differences for items in each of the three areas based on volunteer's gender, length of service, or number of hours served per week. Three significant differences based on gender were found ( $p < .05$ ). In terms of volunteer satisfaction, males ( $n = 25$ ) rated "county agent knows subject matter" lower than females ( $n = 134$ ). The two other differences were found in the area of volunteer experience. Males rated "learn new things because of being a 4-H leader," and "volunteers are included in planning programs" significantly lower than females. There were no significant gender differences for the items related to volunteer understanding. Complete information for the significant items is presented in Table 5.

**Table 5.**  
ANOVA—Significant Item Differences by Gender



	Mean Female	Mean Male	df	F	Sig
County agent know subject matter	3.35	3.30	1	4.13	<b>.044</b>
Learned new things because of 4-H	3.37	2.96	1	8.50	<b>.004</b>
Volunteers are included in planning programs	3.12	2.57	1	4.38	<b>.038</b>

The ANOVA revealed no significant differences for items in all three areas based on length of service or number of hours served per week.

## Discussion and Implications

This article explored volunteer experience and the critical role that 4-H volunteers play in the implementation of PYD programs. Drawing on the results of the study reported here as well as the established literature in volunteer management, there are four important implications, described below.

### 1. Provide Volunteer Training and Support

First, enhancing the experience, understanding, and satisfaction of volunteers is essential. Research indicates such support is important for all volunteers, not just for those who work with youth. PYD theory specifically highlights the important link between adequate program resources, including volunteers, and the ability of youth to reach their full potential. As such, volunteers who feel valued, supported, and well trained for their role are greater assets to the program and thus to youth participants. Research also suggests that adult youth workers who are trained in a developmental perspective have the strongest impact on PYD outcomes (Tierney, Grossman, & Resch, 2000).

Therefore, providing training for volunteers that emphasizes PYD and a developmental understanding is essential to bolstering positive growth in the youth program participants. In addition, 4-H programs must ensure that high-quality interactions with adults actually take place in programs once a trained volunteer is placed in service. If volunteers do not implement what was learned in training, then the whole framework for building PYD is at risk.

### 2. Develop Ways to Sustain Volunteers

While the need for high-caliber training and follow-up is important to the success of 4-H as a PYD program, it is essential to remember that volunteers have their own interests and motivation for volunteering. As we have seen, adults volunteer in youth programs for a variety of reasons, and most identify the importance of making a difference and meeting a need in the community as primary reasons for volunteering. We also know volunteer satisfaction, feeling valued, and having a positive experience are all important to retaining volunteers within the organization.

The gender differences uncovered in the reported study highlight that some volunteer experiences may differ for men and women. While the results are not extensive enough to draw general conclusions, they do show that volunteer needs may not be the same for both genders, and further research is needed into possible

interactions between volunteer gender and its effects on building PYD. In addition, ensuring adequate resources for volunteers in terms of training, enhancing confidence level with the subject matter and PYD, and meeting other volunteer needs is vital to promoting sustained volunteer-youth interactions. Sustained, long-term interactions with adults are one of the key factors in developing PYD in youth (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006; Rhodes, 2002).

### **3. Recognize Volunteers for Contributions to PYD**

Recognizing volunteers for their contribution is an important aspect of developing satisfaction, and satisfied volunteers are more likely to continue in service to an organization. In addition to enhancing satisfaction, however, recognition can also play a big role in developing pro-social norms for an organization. Traditionally, 4-H volunteers are recognized in many ways, but how many of these awards relate to how well the volunteer contributes to the success of the program model? Programs should incorporate ways to honor those who have been successful in implementing programs that promote PYD. Highlighting the efforts of these volunteers publicly can help raise the overall awareness of the purpose of 4-H as a PYD program.

### **4. Monitor Volunteer Experience for Gaps in Program Framework**

The study reported here found that only 25% of volunteers "strongly agreed" with the statement "I learned about PYD through my agent." Despite the fact that the success of 4-H as a PYD program is dependent on the delivery of the program by volunteers, relatively few have learned about PYD from their agent. Possible reasons for this include that the concept of 4-H as a PYD program is still relatively new to field 4-H agents. While the field of PYD has been developing for a number of years, only recently has 4-H been highlighted as a particularly effective PYD program (Lerner & Lerner, 2006). In addition, very few complete theoretical program models for 4-H have been developed and widely disseminated.

Nonetheless, emerging research highlights the impact of the 4-H program on PYD, increasing the need to ensure that 4-H educators receive adequate training in PYD. Educators need to be intentional about training volunteers, and systematic evaluation of programming to ensure that volunteers are implementing programs that match the PYD program model is essential. Without such intentional framing, a huge gap remains between what 4-H says it does and what actually happens in 4-H program.

## **Conclusion**

Volunteers remain the vital link between program theory and outcome achievement, not just in 4-H, but in any program where trained volunteers are instrumental in program delivery. Training, sustaining, recognizing, and evaluating volunteers are four clear steps in ensuring that programs are as successful in reality as we plan them to be on paper.

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