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Preparing Youth Development Professionals to Be Successful: How Do the Needs of Extension/4-H Compare to Those of Other Organizations?

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Abstract: *An online Master's degree in Youth Development Leadership offered by Clemson University serves students nationally with the goal of using a multi-disciplinary approach "to prepare professionals for best practices in positive youth development." A nationwide needs assessment was conducted so that plans to improve and expand the program will meet the needs of the youth development profession. A variety of findings proved beneficial for determining similarities and differences among leaders of 4-H programs and other youth development organizations as well as implications for the types of degrees that would be most valuable for contemporary youth development professionals.*

Background and Purpose

In the process of conducting a nationwide needs assessment for a youth development degree program, a variety of useful findings were discovered related to the types of degrees and coursework that would be most valuable for contemporary youth development professionals. This also helped identify similarities and differences among leaders of 4-H programs and other youth development organizations

An online Master's degree in Youth Development Leadership (YDL) offered by Clemson University, a public land-grant university based in South Carolina, serves students nationally. Current students include a variety of practicing youth development professionals, as well as recent graduates and career-changers. The goal of the YDL degree program <<http://www.clemson.edu/youthdevelopment>> is to use a multi-disciplinary approach "to prepare professionals for best practices in positive youth development."

A survey of key leaders of national youth development programs was conducted to ensure that plans to expand the program to other degrees and non-credit coursework meet the needs of 4-H and other organizations related to the youth development profession.

Cooper and Graham (2001) described the competencies that county agents and county supervisors in Arkansas believe are important for future success. Regarding youth development specifically, Astroth (2003) reported that "The academic credentials and foundations for 4-H youth development work are strong. Since 1986, the 4-H professional research and knowledge taxonomy has provided a scholarly and theoretical framework for this kind of work." The 4-H Professional Research, Knowledge, and Competencies Study (Stone & Rennekamp, 2004) updated and clarified the 4HPRKC model that details six domains important to the current and emerging competencies that are essential to conducting 4-H youth development programs. They are:

- Youth Development
- Youth Program Development
- Volunteerism
- Equity, Access, and Opportunity
- Partnerships

- Organizational Systems

Because many of the courses currently offered or being considered by the Clemson YDL degree program correspond to these domains, the PRKC model provides a good basis for considering the most valuable competencies needed by youth development professionals according to leaders of prominent nationwide youth development organizations.

Furthermore, Scott, Ferrari, Earnest, and Connors (2006) present a model for preparing Extension professionals in an academic setting. Other studies have found the potential value of online courses for Extension agents. A study of Georgia Extension agents (Edwards, McLucas, Briers, & Rohs, 2004) found that "A substantial number of agents were interested in pursuing education at a distance. Interest was greatest for programming leading to a graduate degree."

Berge (1998) stated that "online education can be flexible, accessible and convenient for students; there can often be institutional cost savings and time savings over traditional place-based education; and there is often advantages to the instructor such as ease in updating and revision of courses."

Although few options exist for attaining an online degree that uses a multi-disciplinary approach to positive youth development, The Great Plains Interactive Distance Education Alliance (Great Plains IDEA) is a consortium of eleven universities offering an online graduate program in Youth Development <<http://www.gpidea.org>>. Therefore, another goal of the needs assessment was to minimize duplication with existing degree programs.

Methodology

The study reported here employed descriptive survey research methods and was conducted during February and March of 2007. The questionnaire was designed by the author and reviewed by a group of individuals similar to the respondents, who served as a panel of experts. A Web-based survey was implemented using a commercial, online questionnaire administration service, following proven survey procedures (Dillman, 2000). The questionnaire contained approximately 15 questions, primarily multiple-choice, that required about 7 minutes for respondents to complete.

An announcement of the survey was sent by email to a total of 198 national, multi-state/regional, and state (plus several county/local) representatives of Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, Boys & Girls Clubs of America, Boy Scouts of America, Campfire USA, Girls Inc., Girl Scouts of the USA, Extension/4-H Youth Development, YMCA/YWCA, a variety of religious/faith-based organizations, and government-based formal education agencies. Target recipients of the surveys were affected by the leadership/staffing structure of each organization. In general, the national leader of the organization (and a staff development person if there was one) and any regional leaders were chosen. For 4-H Youth Development, an e-mail distribution list for all state 4-H program leaders was used.

Findings

A total of 100 usable surveys were returned, with all organizations/agencies represented, yielding a 51% overall response rate. Because replies were anonymous, respondents were asked to send an e-mail to the investigator stating "Survey completed" once they were finished. This allowed multiple follow-ups to be conducted with non-respondents with actual responses remaining anonymous.

Fifty-seven percent of all respondents were female, which is representative of the audience surveyed. State 4-H Program Leaders had a response rate of 68%. There were challenges acquiring accurate names and e-mail addresses for respondents in other groups, which were reflected in a lower response rate for other organizations. Most of the non-respondents were representatives of state-level formal education agencies. (If this group had not been included, the overall response rate would have been closer to 70%.) Therefore, findings are more valid for and generalizable to non-formal youth development organizations that were the major emphasis of this needs assessment and the focus of this article.

The following are the key findings that correspond to each topic covered in the survey.

Topics of Study Needed

Participants were presented with a list of topics pertaining to subjects of study needed by the organization for the

purpose of preparing professionals for best practices in youth development. The three-point scale was: "Unnecessary (1), "Valuable (2)," and "Essential (3)." The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1.

The Value of Subjects to Your Organization for the Purpose of Preparing Professionals for Best Practices in Youth Development

Topic of Study	4-H Program Leaders (n=41)	Leaders of Other YD Organizations (n=59)	Total (All respondents) (n=100)
Program Development	2.85 (85%)	2.67 (69%)	2.76 (77%)
Curriculum Development	2.22	2.38	2.33
Marketing	2.32	2.29	2.30
Volunteer Development & Management	2.93 (93)	2.50	2.69 (72)
Grantsmanship	2.34	2.29	2.32
Leadership, Administration, & Supervision	2.68	2.85 (85)	2.78 (78)
Ethics	2.68	2.79 (81)	2.74 (76)
Program Evaluation	2.83 (83)	2.65 (65)	2.74 (74)
Research Methods	2.12	2.08	2.09
Statistics	1.95	2.12	2.05
Youth Development in Context of Family	2.61	2.50	2.55
Child & Adolescent Development	2.76 (76)	2.56 (62)	2.64
Experiential Learning Methods	2.80 (80)	2.40	2.59
Youth Development in Context of Global & Diverse Society	2.49	2.35	2.41
Internship in Youth Development	2.29	2.27	2.26
Note: Topics are listed in the order in which they appeared in the survey, with the five highest ratings in bold and percentage rated as "Essential" in parentheses.			

As indicated in Table 1, three out of five of the top subjects of study were in congruence between 4-H program leaders and other YD leaders: Program Development, Program Evaluation, and Child & Adolescent Development.

The lowest rated topics for both groups were Statistics and Research Methods. Although still rated as Valuable on average (both subjects are needed to be effective with the highly-rated topic of Program Evaluation), they weren't considered the highest priorities regarding the skill sets needed by youth development professionals.

Highest-rated subjects of study by 4-H program leaders:

1. Volunteer Development & Management
2. Program Development
3. Program Evaluation
4. Experiential Learning Methods

5. Child & Adolescent Development

Overall, 4-H Program Leaders rated the importance of the 15 topics as 2.52 on average (out of 3.0), indicating that 4-H program leaders rated the complete list of subjects on average as slightly more valuable than leaders of other YD organizations.

1. Highest-rated subjects of study by leaders of other YD organizations:
2. Leadership, Administration, & Supervision
3. Program Development
4. Program Evaluation
5. Ethics
6. Child & Adolescent Development

Overall, leaders of other YD organizations rated the importance of the 15 topics as 2.45 on average (out of 3.0).

Value of Degrees and Training

From knowledge of the topics covered in the YDL program listed in Table 1, respondents rated the potential value of the following academic degrees and continuing education programs in Youth Development Leadership to its organization and its staff. (A four-point scale ranged from Not Valuable through Very Valuable.) Respondents also ranked each in order of greatest importance (1= Most Important, 5=Least Important).

Table 2.
The Value of Each Degree/Training Level: Percentage of respondents rating as Very Valuable or Valuable

Topic	4-H Program Leaders	Leaders of Other YD Organizations	Total (All respondents)
Doctorate (such as Ph.D.) in YDL	56% (29%)	35% (6%)	42% (16%)
Master's (such as M.S.) in YDL	90 (85)	75 (56)	81 (68)
Bachelor's (such as B.S.) in YDL	71 (61)	90 (73)	82 (68)
Certificate or Undergraduate Minor (comprised of 12 credits in YDL)	49 (17)	53 (29)	52 (25)
Summer Institute or Training Workshops related to YDL	56 (22)	67 (40)	63 (33)
Note: Percentage of respondents ranking it as 1st or 2nd in importance is indicated in parentheses.			

Value of Online YDL Program Delivery

Respondents were asked how beneficial it would be to their organizations and their employees for such degree programs to be offered online. As indicated in Table 3, both groups found this to be beneficial, with 4-H program leaders rating it as Very Beneficial.

Table 3.
Benefit of Online Delivery of Degree Coursework

How Beneficial?	4-H Program Leaders	Leaders of Other YD Organizations	TOTAL (All respondents)
Not Beneficial	0%	2%	1%
Somewhat Beneficial	12	27	21
Beneficial	39	36	38
Very Beneficial	49	35	40
Note: Percentage of respondents by response choice			

Value of Multi-Disciplinary Approach

Respondents were asked whether the multi-disciplinary approach offered by the Clemson YDL degree program provided a better alternative to preparing current or prospective staff than existing, single-discipline majors (such as Education, Psychology, Sociology, etc.). Both groups found the YDL approach to be a better alternative than existing, single-discipline majors.

Table 4.
Value of Multi-Disciplinary Approach
(Percentage of respondents by response choice)

Value of Multi-Disciplinary Approach	4-H Program Leaders	Leaders of Other YD Organizations	Total (All respondents)
It's a Better Alternative	71%	60%	66%
Existing Majors Preferred	2	6	4
No Difference/No Preference	27	34	30
Note: Percentage of respondents by response choice			

Benefits to Hiring

Respondents were asked how favorable it would be in the hiring process for a job applicant in their organization or agency to have earned the following degrees in Youth Development Leadership. (A four-point scale ranged from Not Favorable through Very Favorable.)

Table 5.
Benefits to Hiring

Topic	4-H Program Leaders	Leaders of Other YD Organizations	TOTAL (All respondents)
Bachelor's (such as B.S.) in YDL	73%	85%	80%
Certificate or Undergraduate Minor (comprised of 12 credits in YDL)	56	52	54
Master's (such as M.S.) in YDL	95	77	85

Doctorate (such as Ph.D.) in YDL	85	59	70
Note: Percentage of respondents rating as Very Favorable or Favorable			

Although, overall, respondents rated a Master's degree in Youth Development Leadership as the most favorable degree, leaders of non-4-H YD organizations rated the Bachelor's degree highest, whereas 4-H program leaders rated a Master's degree (followed by a doctoral degree) highest.

How Would Employees with a YDL Degree be Beneficial?

Respondents were asked in what ways employee(s) with a YDL degree would be beneficial to the professional and/or the organization and its clientele. A representative sample of responses from the open-ended question included the following.

- For an organization that specializes in Youth Development, it would be valuable to have people trained/educated specifically with YD in mind.
- Currently, employees are hired in program areas like dairy & animal science, education, etc. Having a focus on youth development which includes key program areas on volunteer management would allow for the needed knowledge that is required by the position. There would be less stressful on-the-job learning.
- They would truly understand what we in 4-H Youth Development are trying to do. It would not be a piecemeal attempt at understanding the profession.
- It would increase their credentials as professionals in the field of positive youth development and volunteer management.
- YDL degree would provide candidates with basic knowledge of youth development, volunteer management, and program development which we could build upon within our organization with real work experience. We now get good candidates without youth development knowledge or volunteer management theory and we spend the first several months getting them up to speed in these areas for orientation.
- Could communicate the reasons to develop and implement programs based on research to parents, volunteers, and stakeholders. The philosophy of positive youth development is not understood by some stakeholders and sometimes they don't understand why we don't allow certain things in our programs.
- [Current employees] seem to be great at event and activity planning but without purpose and evaluated for effectiveness in meeting the developmental needs of young people. If we have BA and MA employees with solid education and background in youth development, program design, and volunteer management, we would be in a much better place than we currently are.
- An in-depth knowledge of youth development, program development among diverse youth and grant management would help develop stronger youth programs with a larger impact on youth and their families.

Number of Employees to be Hired With YDL Degrees

Respondents were asked to estimate the total number of people who may benefit from the following YDL degrees in potential hiring by their organization or promotions within their organization during the next 5 years. (Respondents who were not a national representative were asked to estimate those in their area of geographic responsibility.)

Although the mode was less than five hires per degree, the percentage of respondents reporting 6-25 potential hires with YDL degrees in the next five years are:

- Doctorate (such as Ph.D.) - 13%
- Master's (such as M.S.) - 39%
- Bachelor's (such as B.S.) - 25%

- Certificate or Undergraduate Minor - 20%

Overall, 69% reported they were Very Likely or Somewhat Likely to hire a person with a doctorate in YDL in the next 5 years, assuming qualified graduates are available to hire.

Rewarding a Doctoral Degree

Respondents who indicated they were Somewhat Likely or Very Likely to hire a person with a doctorate in YDL in the next five years were asked if the current professional structure exists in their organization to reward a doctoral graduate in YDL in terms of salary, challenge, etc. As noted earlier, Extension/4-H is more likely able to utilize a candidate with a doctoral degree than other YD organizations.

Table 6.
Will Doctoral Degree in YDL Be Rewarded?

Will Doctoral Degree in YDL Be Rewarded?	4-H Program Leaders	Leaders of Other YD Organizations	TOTAL (All respondents)
Yes	68.8%	28.1%	48.5%
No	31.2	71.9	51.5

Conclusions and Implications

The survey reported here confirmed that the courses currently being offered or being considered by the Youth Development Leadership degree program are indeed those that leaders in the field believe are important to build the competencies of youth development professionals in organizations and agencies nationwide. Such topics seem to correspond well to the 4HPRKC model.

An interesting difference was in the top-rated course needed by each group: whereas 4-H program leaders rated Volunteer Development & Management as the most important, other YD program leaders rated Leadership, Administration, & Supervision as the highest. This most likely highlights a difference in the volunteer-driven nature of 4-H versus the staff-driven nature of many other youth development organizations. Obviously, both topics revolve around leadership/administration. But one focuses on engaging volunteers in the process, whereas the other implies focusing on the skills of the organization's paid staff to carry out its mission.

The Master's degree currently offered appears to be in demand. Although, overall, respondents rated a Master's degree in Youth Development Leadership as the most favorable degree, leaders of non-4-H youth development organizations rated the Bachelor's degree highest, whereas 4-H program leaders rated a Master's degree (followed by a doctoral degree) highest.

In regard to expansion to other degrees, Extension/4-H program leaders see greater potential value of or ability to hire candidates with doctoral degrees (typically in campus-based, state-level positions) than leaders of non-Extension youth development programs. Also, because Extension/4-H programs are university-based, they are generally more able to reward advanced degrees accordingly and have positions available that do.

Other YD organizations seem to prefer adding a Bachelor's degree to the program. This may be because Extension organizations in most states expect program staff (agents/educators) to obtain Master's degrees and many states still expect a technical/science-related major for the undergraduate degree. On the other hand, other youth development organizations may not expect a graduate degree and, therefore, may prefer the first, and potentially only, degree (Bachelor's) to be earned by their program staff to be in YDL.

Leaders in the youth development field recognized the potential value of a specific, multi-disciplinary youth development degree over current offerings and wholeheartedly recognized the benefits of such a degree being offered online.

The ultimate proof of the acceptance of such a degree will come in the hiring of graduates of the program.

Findings indicate there is a good potential for employment or promotion by candidates with advanced degrees in Youth Development Leadership.

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