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## State 4-H Council: A Look Back on What It Meant to Serve

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## State 4-H Council: A Look Back on What It Meant to Serve

### Abstract

An ex-post facto evaluation design was implemented to Texas 4-H Council Members from 1987-2006 to seek the perceived impact of life skill development as a result of serving on council. Former Texas 4-H Council members ( $n = 38$ ) noted that the life skills that were enhanced the most from serving on the council were: development of oral communication skills, ability to relate to others, working in teams, and building self-esteem. In summary, data presented in this article indicate that Texas 4-H Council is an excellent promoter of youth through various aspects of youth development.

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## Introduction

There is need for more in-depth evaluations of specific programs in 4-H. Even though there are some studies on the impact of 4-H (Howard, 2001; Boyd, 1991; Ladewig & Thomas, 1987), historically, 4-H Youth Development Programs have fallen short in relation to evaluation and accountability of program impact.

Howard (2001), Boyd (1991), and Ladewig and Thomas (1987) certainly answered some specific questions pertaining to self-fulfillment, leadership, and reflective thoughts about 4-H. However, there are limited evaluations on the impact that specific 4-H leadership positions have had on the development of youth.

Texas 4-H decided to conduct this study to determine if serving in a leadership role on the Texas 4-H Council was instrumental in the development of youth.

Youth involvement in program development at all levels is an essential aspect of successful 4-H programming. For this reason, the Texas 4-H Council provides representative 4-H youth new opportunities for personal development, which are stated below:

- Provide opportunities to give input to the state Extension staff on programs for 4-H youth.

- Maintain linkages with district 4-H Councils.
- Assist with the development and implementation of state events and activities.
- Provide 4-H youth the opportunity to learn democratic principles and procedures.
- Interpret the 4-H program to the public through effective and satisfying group organization.
- Identify needs and interests of 4-H youth.
- Suggest and explore action programs that will meet the needs and interests of youth.
- Advise in the determination of future 4-H programs.

## Purpose and Research Questions

The study reported here determined the impact serving on Texas 4-H Council had on former members. Three major research questions were asked to address this purpose.

- Research Questions 1. How serving on 4-H Council influence or contribute to certain life skills?
- Research Questions 2. Was the development of these life skills different for officers vs. non-officers?
- Research Question 3. Did serving on 4-H Council impact the development of your career?

## Methodology

The study was an ex-post facto design using a mailed survey technique. It asked former members to reflect back on their 4-H Council membership and determine the magnitude of life skill development that was enhanced as a result of serving on state council. Surveys were mailed to former 4-H Council members (1987-2006) randomly selected from the past 20 years.

The first section of the survey asked participants to evaluate life skill development as a result of being a member of 4-H Council. The life skills asked were: decision making, ability to relate to others, accepting responsibility, self esteem, motivation, organizational skills, problem solve, communicating orally, setting goals, self discipline, and team work. The procedures used for this section followed Rusk, Martin, Talbert, & Balshweid (2002) with modifications by Boleman, Cummings, and Briers (2004). The scale used to measure the magnitude of this development was defined as 1 = *Not Influential At All*, 2 = *Mildly Influential*, 3 = *Moderately Influential*, and 4 = *Highly Influential*.

The second section asked level of education and income questions that follow the same format from the 4-H volunteer screening application form. A forced yes/no question within this section asked if career choice was influenced by serving on 4-H Council (NA was also provided as a choice). A final open-ended question asked respondents to explain the response to the previous question.

Content and face validity was evaluated by several faculty members of the 4-H Program (including one former 4-H Council member) and two evaluation specialists in Texas Cooperative Extension. The 11 life skills were also evaluated for internal consistencies using Cronbach's coefficient alpha before responses were analyzed. Cronbach's coefficient alpha was .904, indicating a strong internal consistency measure. After review and slight modifications the survey was deemed ready for mailing.

The survey was mailed following Dillman's Technique (2000). This included a preletter and a mailed survey with a self-addressed stamped envelope to return. Thirty-eight of 76 were returned, yielding a response rate of 50.0%.

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize data in SPSS 14.0. Frequencies, percentages, central tendency measures, and variability were used to describe these data. To measure relationships, continuous variables were compared using Pearson's product moment correlations. Independent samples t-test were used to measure two variable comparisons. Confidence intervals and tests for statistical significance were set *a priori* at the 0.05 level. The opened-ended responses were analyzed and coded using qualitative research methodology outlined by Dooley and Murphy (2001).

## Results

### Demographics

The mean age of respondents was 27.2 (S.D. = 5.50). Twenty of the respondents were female, and 17 were male. (One did not provide a response.) The median year the respondent served on 4-H

Council was 1996. Fourteen of 38 said that their highest level of education was a Masters degree. This was followed by Bachelor degree - 11, some college - 11, Doctorate degree - 3, and Associate degree - 1. Twelve respondents said they had been officers, and 26 said they had not.

## Research Question 1

Table 1 and Figure 1 are included to reveal data from the question pertaining to the role that serving on 4-H Council had on members' life skill development. The two life skills that respondents said were most influential were "develop oral communication" and "ability to relate to others" (Mean = 3.76, S.D. = .63 and .43, respectively). This was followed by "work in teams" (Mean = 3.68, S.D. = .62) and "build self esteem" (Mean = 3.68, S.D. = .66). These four also revealed the highest frequency total for the "highly essential" response as seen in Figure 1. "Develop oral communication" revealed the highest frequency of 32. "Ability to relate to others," "work in teams," and "build self esteem" all had 29 for the "highly essential" choice.

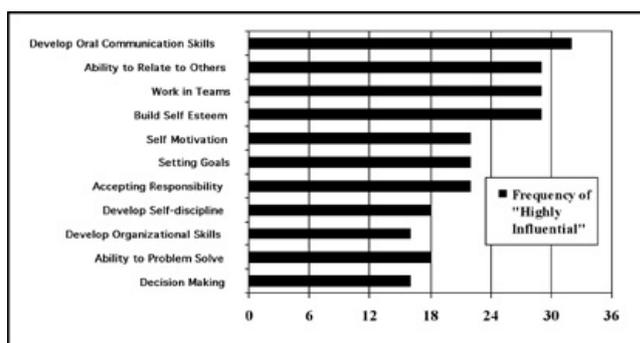
**Table 1.**  
Rank Means and Standard Deviations for Life Skill Development from Former Members of the 4-H Council

Life Skill	Mean <sup>1</sup>	S.D.
Develop Oral Communication Skills	3.76	.63
Ability to Relate to Others	3.76	.43
Work in Teams	3.68	.62
Build Self Esteem	3.68	.66
Self Motivation	3.52	.60
Setting Goals	3.50	.64
Accepting Responsibility	3.42	.79
Develop Self-discipline	3.34	.71
Develop Organizational Skills	3.32	.66
Ability to Problem Solve	3.29	.77
Decision Making	3.29	.69

<sup>1</sup>Scale: 1 = Not Influential At All, 2 = Mildly Influential, 3 = Moderately Influential, and 4 = Highly Influential.

**Figure 1.**

Frequency "Highly Influential" Responses for Life Skill Development from Former Members of the 4-H Council



The lowest mean value was "ability to problem solve" and "decision making" (Mean = 3.29, S.D = .77 and .69, respectively).

When comparing these results to studies conducted by other researchers, there are consistencies to the development of life skills of 4-H Council members when compared to other studies. For example, in a study conducted by Nash and Sant (2005) on the development of life skills in 4-H animal judging, their findings showed life skill development in the categories of decision-making, teamwork, oral communication, self-motivation, organizational skills, problems solving, and self-discipline. All seven of these are consistent with life skills measured in this study. In another study conducted by Boleman, Cummings, and Briers (2004) on parents' perceptions of life skills gained by youth participating in the 4-H Beef Project, there were consistencies between the 11 life skills developed in this study and through the 4-H Council study. Ward (1996) revealed mean values of over 4.0 in the categories of decision making, ability to relate to others, and help you accept responsibility on a similar Likert scale. All three of these are consistent life skills demonstrated in

the 4-H Council study.

In addition to these life skills, respondents were asked to provide the single most important trait learned from being on 4-H Council. When analyzing the comments using qualitative analysis technique described by Dooley and Murphy (2001), the underlying theme was "leadership." In further defining these comments and grouping them into like categories, the following list was compiled within leadership, which included: communication, management skills, networking, and confidence. Six of the 34 (**17.65%**) responses had the word leader or leadership worded in them. An example of one comment was "Leadership skills."

Within leadership was "communication." Responses that fell into the communication category ranged from informal communication to public speaking. Eleven out of 34 (**32.35%**) responses dealt with communication. An example of a communication response was, "The most significant thing I gained by being a member of the 4-H council is people skills which helps me in my occupation."

Another category within leadership was "management skills." When analyzing management skills in relation to this question, respondents referred to time management, accomplishing goals, and people management. Five out of 34 (**14.71%**) comments fit in this category. An example of management skill comment found in the survey question is "The experience helped with the development of skills to manage people and tasks."

"Networking" is the next category within leadership. Participants stated here they gained new relationships with friends, made new networks, and made new connections, which placed them in the network category. There were eight out of 34 (**23.53%**) responses that fell into the networking category. An example of a response that fell into the networking category is, "Friends/ connections that helped in college and beyond. A wonderful network of people."

The last subcategory within leadership was "confidence." The responses from the participants that were placed in the confidence category included aspects such as confidence in oneself and believing in oneself. There were twelve out of 34 (**34.29%**) responses that fell into the confidence category. An example of the confidence category is "Confidence and responsibility in everything I do."

Table 2 provides more details related to the most significant skill gained from being on 4-H Council.

**Table 2.**  
Major Themes and Subcategories from the Question "What Did 4-H Council Do for You"

Question	Major Theme (Frequency)	Sub-Category (Frequency)
What is the most significant thing you gained by being a member of the Texas 4-H Council?	Leadership: <b>31</b> out of 34	Confidence (12), Communication (11), Networking (8), Leadership (6), Management Skills (5)

## Research Question 2

The second question evaluated the life skill development comparing officer and non-officer 4-H Council members. Overall, all 11 life skills had higher mean values for influence than non-officer mean values. Two of 11 revealed significantly higher mean values ( $p < .05$ ) when comparing officers to non-officers. These two were "accepting responsibility" (Officer Mean = 3.83, S.D. = .39 and (Non-officer Mean = 3.23, S.D. = .86) and "develop organizational skills" (Officer Mean = 3.67, S.D. = .49 and (Non-officer Mean = 3.15, S.D. = .67). The life skill "self discipline" also approached significant differences, with a p-value of .06. Table 3 lists all comparisons.

**Table 3.**  
Independent Samples t-test Comparing Life Skill Development of Officer (n = 12) vs. Non-Officers (n = 26) from Former Members of the 4-H Council

Life Skill	Officers		Non-officers		t-score
	Mean <sup>1</sup>	S.D.	Mean <sup>1</sup>	S.D.	
Develop Oral Communication Skills	3.92	.29	3.70	.74	1.02
Ability to Relate to Others	3.67	.49	3.80	.40	0.94
Work in Teams	3.92	.29	3.58	.70	1.60
Build Self Esteem	3.83	.39	3.62	.75	0.94
Self Motivation	3.75	.45	3.42	.64	1.59

Setting Goals	3.67	.49	3.42	.70	1.08
Accepting Responsibility	3.83	.39	3.23	.86	2.30 *
Develop Self-discipline	3.67	.49	3.19	.70	2.00
Develop Organizational Skills	3.67	.49	3.15	.67	2.35 *
Ability to Problem Solve	3.42	.67	3.23	.82	0.69
Decision Making	3.50	.67	3.19	.69	1.28
<sup>1</sup> Scale: 1 = Not Influential At All, 2 = Mildly Influential, 3 = Moderately Influential, and 4 = Highly Influential. *significant at the .05 level.					

### Research Question 3

The third research question asked former 4-H Council members if serving on council influenced career goals. Twenty-five of 35 (71.4%) said yes it did influence their career goals.

A follow-up question asked respondents to provide a description of their occupation. Six major categories of employment were identified after qualitative analysis. The six categories included education, business, government, law, self-employed, and other. The categories with more specific descriptions are below.

- **Education** - High School Counselor, Extension 4-H Livestock Specialist, Higher Education (Academia), Catholic School Principal, County Extension Agent Family and Consumer Sciences, County Extension Agent-4-H and Youth Development, Counselor at the Texas 4-H Center, Teacher
- **Business** - Financial Planner, Banking, Credit Manager/Loan Officer, Restaurant Manager, President/CEO, Business Mg.-Livestock Production, Finance/Training, Accountant
- **Government** - Government Relations and Lobbying, Government, Government, Animal Health Tech/ USDA
- **Law** - Attorney
- **Self Employed** - Actress/Model, Rancher, Business Owner
- **Other** - Nurse practitioner, Registered Nurse, Babysitter, General Manager- Feedlot, Ranch Manager

It also worth noting that five individuals said they were students.

### Conclusions

4-H Council provides youth with an opportunity to gain life skills in a multitude of ways. Through these data presented, life skills in youth were in fact influenced through 4-H council. The two life skills that respondents stated were most influenced by the 4-H council were "develop oral communication" and "ability to relate to others." (Mean=3.76, S.D.= .63 and .43, respectively).

There was little difference when comparing officer to non-officer life skill development. Only two life skills (Accepting Responsibility and Develop Organizational Skills) revealed significant differences. This could be partially attributed to the fact that the majority of state council members also serve as officers on the district council. Further research should be conducted to determine the magnitude of life skill development of youth serving on district 4-H Councils.

In addition to the life skills developed from 4-H Council, participants also indicated traits that were learned through 4-H Council. An overall theme that was established from these traits stated by respondents was "leadership." The categories that were broken down under this leadership category consisted of: communication, management skills, networking, and confidence.

4-H Council also served as a stimulus for many of the participants' career goals and professional development. Results showed that 25 of 35 (71.4%) people said 4-H Council influenced their career goals in some aspect. Respondents were also asked to list their respected professions.

4-H Council is an excellent promoter of youth through various aspects of youth development. 4-H Council plays a crucial part in influencing life skills for those who serve on it as well an even larger part for those who were officers. 4-H Council is also a promoter of career goals and professionalism. Finally, by being a part of 4-H Council, participants have the opportunity to explore career goals and develop skills needed to be successful in different career fields.

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