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Youth Perceptions of Ohio 4-H

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Youth Perceptions of Ohio 4-H

Abstract

Youth have a variety of extracurricular activities to choose from. For 4-H to continue to remain an attractive and relevant youth development experience, we need to be cognizant of how youth perceive 4-H. Results from over 1,400 youth in northwest Ohio reveal that those youth affiliated with 4-H perceive it more favorably than non-members. Also, as youth age, there tends to be a reduction in overall favorable rating of 4-H. It is important for 4-H to consider youth perceptions in program planning and adapting to the needs of new audiences and older youth.

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Introduction

Heinsohn and Lewis (1995) report, ". . . at any given time, participation in 4-H, Scouts, and other youth organizations is skewed with 9 to 11 year-olds comprising over half of the participants." They go on to state, "A look at early adolescence tells us youth leaving these programs to do something else is a part of the developmental process rather than a programming glitch." "They want to pursue interests and activities of their own, not their parents' choosing. Also there are many more activities for teens to choose from, many of which they can access themselves."

According to Thompson (1998), "The three reasons non re-enrollees ranked as most important in their decision to not re-enroll were (1) they were too busy; (2) other activities were more important; and (3) they did not have enough time for 4-H activities." The researcher concluded that it is not how many activities teens are involved with, but how important 4-H is to them in comparison to the other activities that determines whether they remain in 4-H." Thompson (1998) reports "Ohio 4-H has had little problem attracting preteen 4-H members to the program, but has experienced difficulty retaining the members through the teen years." Thompson (1998), citing a study by Nichols (1973), reported that "members with high participation levels were less likely to drop out and that participation levels were inversely related to their age at initial enrollment." Thompson also cites Beasley (1980), stating, "Peer influence is an important factor in recruitment and retention." In Leeds' (1997) study of 4-H members in Union County, Ohio, she found "The high school age participants expressed frustration that 4-H sometimes felt as though it was focused toward younger members."

The purpose of the study reported here was to explore the perceptions youth report about 4-H.

Methods and Procedures

The descriptive and correlation study was conducted to assess youth perceptions of 4-H. Nine cooperating schools, located in five northwest Ohio counties, were chosen by the researchers. These include: Crestview Local Schools, Coldwater Exempted Village Schools, Delphos St. Johns Parochial Schools, Miller City Local Schools, Edgerton Local Schools, Fort Jennings Local Schools, Mill Creek West Unity Schools, Montpelier Exempted Village Schools, and Wayne Trace Local Schools. Three written questionnaires were designed and tailored for past 4-H members, current 4-H members, and those who have never joined 4-H. The instruments were designed to be short and cover multiple aspects of 4-H. Five related questions were evaluated using Cronbach's alpha with a reliability coefficient of .83 to provide a test of reliability.

This research was reviewed and accepted by the Human Subjects Review Board at The Ohio State University. Written parental permission was obtained for participants who took part in the study. Anonymity and confidentiality of participants and their individual responses were maintained throughout the project. The researchers administered the instruments in the spring of 2005 to the participating schools.

Youth in grades 4, 7, and 10 were invited to participate in the study, with 1,462 students providing usable data from the nine cooperating schools. Five-point anchored Likert-type questions were developed measuring levels of agreement (from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree"). Questions were analyzed using Kruskal Wallis tests to determine significant differences in sample responses based on group identifiers. Pearson correlations were used to determine interrelation between various components of the research.

Research questions included:

1. Is there a difference in perception of 4-H among youth who are currently enrolled in 4-H, those who were former members of 4-H (but left the organization), and those who never enrolled in 4-H?
2. Is there a difference in perception of 4-H among 4th, 7th, and 10th grade students?

Results

Difference in Perception Based on 4-H Enrollment

1. Is there a difference in perception of 4-H among youth who are currently enrolled in 4-H, those who were former members of 4-H (but left the organization), and those who never enrolled in 4-H?

When evaluating the perception of 4-H perceived by youth, a significant difference was found (Table 1) indicating that youth who are members of 4-H or were former members of 4-H are more likely to agree that 4-H is "fun" and "cool," and less likely to agree that 4-H is "boring ($p < .01$)."

Table 1.
Perceptions of Ohio 4-H Based on Member Status ($p < .01$)

Member Status	4-H Fun	4-H Cool	4-H Boring
Current 4-H Member	4.21	3.94	1.61
Past 4-H Member	3.24	3.06	2.54
Never 4-H Member	2.75	2.70	2.79

Difference in Perception Based on Grade

2. Is there a difference in perception of 4-H among 4th, 7th, and 10th grade students?

A significant difference was found in the perceptions of 4-H among youth in the 4th, 7th, and 10th grades ($p < .01$). The older the youth, the less favorable they viewed Ohio 4-H (Table 2).

Table 2.
Perceptions of Ohio 4-H Based on Grade Level of Youth Respondent ($p < .01$)

Grade	4-H Fun	4-H Cool	4-H Boring
4th	3.53	3.37	1.99
7th	2.84	2.75	2.76

10th	2.76	2.71	3.00
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Difference in Perception Based on Age

When evaluating the likelihood of continued involvement in 4-H and the level of perceived encouragement from parents and friends, there was a significant difference based on age ($p < .01$). Older youth were less likely to agree that they intend to stay in 4-H, that their parents want them in 4-H, or that their friends want them in 4-H ($p < .01$) (Table 3).

Table 3.
4-H Member Perceptions about Involvement in 4-H Based on Age ($p < .01$)

Grade	I Will Stay in 4-H	My Parents Want Me in 4-H	My Friends Want Me in 4-H
4th	4.35	2.79	3.06
7th	3.52	2.38	2.35
10th	2.61	2.25	2.11

Summary

- Youth who are currently involved in 4-H perceive the organization more favorable than youth who have never been involved in 4-H ($p < .01$). 4-H members agree more strongly that 4-H is "fun" and "cool," and are less likely to agree that 4-H is "boring".
- Older youth are less likely to find 4-H as appealing ($p < .01$). As youth age, they are less likely to agree that 4-H is "fun" and "cool," and are more likely to agree that 4-H is "boring".
- Older youth are less likely to report that they intend to remain involved in 4-H and also indicate that their parents and friends are less likely to encourage them to remain involved in 4-H ($p < .01$). There is a significant decrease in the level of agreement to statements such as "I will stay in 4-H," "My Parents want me in 4-H," and "My friends want me in 4-H" when comparing 4th, 7th, and 10th grade students.

Discussion

Youth have a variety of activity choices from which to select. It is important to listen to youth perceptions of 4-H if it is to remain successful in meeting the needs of diverse youth. We need to critically evaluate 4-H programs to make sure that they are attractive to youth. Youth will gravitate to those activities that they perceive as "fun," "cool," and of interest to them. Those who have experience with 4-H (members and even past members that left the organization) believe 4-H is more attractive than those that were never a member.

The research reported here indicates that there is a significant difference in the perceptions of Ohio 4-H based on age. Older youth are less likely to indicate that they find the program attractive and are more likely to leave the 4-H program.

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