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## Life-Skill Development Found in 4-H Animal Judging

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## Life-Skill Development Found in 4-H Animal Judging

### Abstract

A study was conducted in Idaho to determine the impact of the 4-H animal judging program on the life skills of former participants and how judging influenced their lives. The results of the study show that the judging program has affected the development of animal industry knowledge and is at least moderately influential on the development of communication, decision-making, problem solving, self-discipline, self-motivation, teamwork, and organization. All these skills have been recognized as beneficial life skills associated with workforce preparedness. Over 97% of the judging alumni indicated that the Idaho 4-H judging experience positively influenced their personal success.

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## Introduction

Throughout the history of 4-H youth programming, the development of valuable life skills such as communication, problem solving, and understanding one's self have been taught through experiential learning activities (Boyd, Herring, & Briers, 1992). Animal judging activities have been traditional 4-H programs offered to youth as a means of becoming competent in animal evaluation. The traditional activities include livestock, dairy, and horse judging contests. The purpose of these activities has been to encourage the critical evaluation of the livestock and horses as a method of bringing about improvement of the animals.

The judging contest or activity centers around the evaluation of a class or group of four animals and then determination of a placing or ranking of the animals from most desirable to least desirable, based on a standard set forth by experts from the university and livestock/horse industry. The evaluation activity exercises the youth participants' decision-making and problem-solving skills as they determine the most logical ranking order of the animals. Judging participants learn to evaluate the desirable and undesirable points of conformation in a class of four animals (McCann, 1998). According to Hunsley & Beeson (1988), "The judging of livestock uses skills which involve the comparison of differences."

More important, the process of judging animals has a positive impact on the development of workforce skills. McCann and McCann (1992) stated that the livestock judging activity provides youth who have an interest in the livestock industry the opportunity to develop necessary skills for their futures and their careers. The skills developed through the evaluation process of the judging activity can be utilized in real-life situations.

Another important component of the judging activity is the participants' preparation and actual delivery of a set of oral reasons. The oral reasons are the contestants' way to describe their ranking of the animals and defend their thought processes and decisions. The reasons are typically presented in a logical and professional manner. Oral reasons allow participants to become more

proficient in defending their decisions using public speaking skills (Purdue Cooperative Extension Service, 1998). Livestock judging in combination with oral reasons provides participants with valuable real-life tools. Livestock judging participants are provided the opportunity to expand their critical thinking, decision-making and communication skills (Eversole, 1990).

The Idaho Youth Horse contests have a 33-year history of judging activities to qualify youth for national competitions. The livestock judging program in Idaho has not been as structured as the horse contests. There has only been a state livestock judging contest for 6 years, and there is not an official state dairy judging contest. Other states have a rich tradition of judging activities. For example, the states surrounding Idaho have had state livestock judging contests and state horse contests since the mid 1950's and 60's. Indiana began a state livestock judging contest in 1919 (Smith & Kirkpatrick, 1990).

Even though Idaho does not have a long history of state competitions for livestock and dairy judging, many counties in Idaho have been holding county competitions for over 20 years, with one county holding an annual livestock judging contest since the 1930's. There has not been any significant research to determine if the judging activities have had an impact on the development of life skills in former Idaho livestock, horse and dairy judging participants.

In 2003, a study was conducted to determine the impact of the Idaho 4-H Livestock and Horse Judging programs on past participants' development of beneficial life skills associated with career preparation. The Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS, 1991) determined important skills needed in the work place and was helpful in designing evaluation questions for the study. The objectives of the study were to:

1. Determine the demographic characteristics of 4-H judging participants;
2. Determine the influence of the 4-H Judging Program on career preparation; and
3. Collect qualitative input from former participants on how the 4-H Judging Program influenced their personal growth from a retrospective standpoint.

## **Materials and Methods**

The data for this study were collected using survey research methods. The data were in quantitative and qualitative forms. The questionnaire was adapted from a questionnaire used to collect livestock judging data in Indiana (Martin, 2000). The questionnaire explored the demographics of age, sex, type of judging experience (livestock, horse, dairy), and years of participation (number of years and when). It addressed the influence of judging on career preparation life skills and asked the importance of judging on gaining animal industry knowledge.

The participants were asked to rate the influence that the 4-H livestock judging activity had on the development of specified life skills. The range of the scale was from one to five, one being "not influential at all," to five being "extremely influential" on the following life skills (most of these were identified to be important workforce preparation skills in the SCANS report):

- Ability to verbally defend a decision
- Animal industry knowledge
- Decision-making
- Oral communication
- Organizational skills
- Problem solving
- Self-confidence
- Self-discipline
- Self-motivation
- Teamwork

The participants were also asked to give qualitative accounts as to how the Idaho 4-H Livestock Judging Program influenced their personal growth.

The surveyed population consisted of individuals who had participated in a livestock (including dairy) or horse judging activity in Idaho. The individuals were identified by contacting each county Extension office in Idaho requesting a list of former judging participants from that county. A letter and an email were sent to the 42 University of Idaho Extension offices explaining the research project and its purpose. Of the counties, 62% responded with a list of former participants. Additional participants were identified via telephone calls and letters to 4-H volunteers and FFA advisors. Mailed surveys with follow-up were the only instrument used to collect data.

On April 4, 2003, an explanatory cover letter was mailed with the survey and a self-addressed stamped envelope to 398 former participants of the Idaho 4-H judging program. Participants were asked to respond in 2 weeks. To help the researcher identify non-respondents, the envelopes were coded. After the first mailing, 99 responses were received, with an additional 16 returned with incorrect addresses that were not updatable and so were deleted from the list. The initial response rate was 25.9%.

At the end of 2 weeks, a post card reminder was mailed to non-respondents, and at 4 weeks from

the initial letter, another letter was mailed indicating that the survey had not been received. At this mailing, another copy of the survey was included as well as a self-addressed stamped envelope. A total of 162 completed questionnaires were returned for a response rate of 41%.

When all the completed questionnaires were returned, data were entered into a spreadsheet. Numerical codes were assigned to the responses to allow for quantitative analysis. Once the data were compiled, they were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS Version 9.0 for Windows, 1998) to determine the descriptive statistics for means, standard deviations, and frequencies. The qualitative data were compiled into a word document. There were a total of 152 responses to the qualitative portion of the survey. The questionnaire asked participants to respond to: How did your 4-H horse/livestock judging experience influence your personal growth? The responses were identified to fit in the following categories:

- The 4-H Judging Program had a positive influence on my life.
- The 4-H Judging Program had a positive influence on my personal success.
- The 4-H Judging Program influenced my workforce preparation.
- The 4-H Judging Program influenced my animal industry knowledge.
- The 4-H Judging Program influenced my ability to think on my feet.
- The 4-H Judging Program had no influence on me.

## Results

The survey revealed that the Idaho 4-H Judging Program is a popular activity and has had an impact on the youth of Idaho for over 40 years. The median age of the participants was 20-25 years-old, and 61% of them were female. The respondents had been involved in judging from 1959 to 2002. The judging experience question determined that:

- 71.5% of the respondents participated in livestock judging,
- 42.4% participated in horse judging,
- 38.7% participated in dairy judging, and
- 43.6% of the youth participated in two or more judging areas

The quantitative data indicate the program is highly influential in the development of animal industry knowledge because it had a mean of 4.22 and is at least moderately influential on the development of beneficial life skills associated with workforce preparedness with a mean of 3.41 or higher for all of the skills (Table 1).

**Table 1.**  
Life Skills Developed

Life Skill	No.	Mean	St. Dev.	Frequency of Responses				
				Not Influential	Mildly Influential	Moderately Influential	Highly Influential	Extremely Influential
Animal Industry Knowledge	162	4.22	.97	4	7	23	43	79
Self-confidence	162	3.83	.99	3	11	43	51	48
Decision Making	162	3.82	.89	2	9	46	66	36
Verbally Defend a Decision	162	3.72	1.10	2	9	35	59	40
Teamwork	162	3.69	1.12	9	8	39	49	44
Oral Communication	162	3.54	1.08	10	15	43	58	30
Self-motivation	162	3.48	1.16	10	23	42	46	35
Organizational Skills	161	3.46	1.15	10	19	51	37	37

Problem Solving	162	3.45	.95	9	8	63	57	19
Self-discipline	162	3.41	1.13	10	23	47	47	28

The qualitative data were compiled into a word document. There were a total of 152 responses to the qualitative portion of the survey. Responses to the open-ended question related to the influence of participating in 4-H animal judging activities on personal growth were coded and sorted into one of six categories: positive influence on my life, positive influence on my personal success, influenced my workforce preparation, influenced my animal industry knowledge, influenced my ability to think on my own, and/or had no influence on me.

From the responses, 64.4% indicated that the 4-H judging program had a positive influence on participants' personal success. Examples of the responses include:

- "Being involved in judging programs helped me to focus and utilize my decision-making and thinking skills. I am now a registered nurse where I make many focused decisions every day. Being on the judging team helped me become who I am today. I treat and take care of the world thanks to 4-H."
- "Most of all, it helped me decide what I wanted to do for the rest of my life because now I know that I can accomplish anything that I put my mind to."

The 4-H judging program positively influenced 63.8% in preparation for the workforce. For example:

- "In judging, you learn to give reasons and that teaches you to communicate and that is essential in today's world."
- "By being involved in the 4-H livestock judging program I was able to strengthen my character tremendously. I learned much about communicating, decision-making skills, self-confidence, and dedication. The communication skills and confidence that I attained through giving oral reasons has helped me in many different areas of my life."
- "Judging has given me lots of self-confidence and has improved my people skills."

Sixty-five percent of the respondents that indicated the 4-H judging program had a positive influence on their animal industry knowledge.

- "This experience gave me confidence in my ability to identify quality livestock-dairy animals. I use this ability every day because we run a dairy feedlot and quality is a big part of our business. It is becoming a more important part of agriculture. We have to recognize the animals that will grow and be profitable."
- "It helps me be selective in helping my husband further our own herd of cows."

Forty-two respondents or 27.6% indicated that the 4-H judging program helped them think on their feet. For example:

- "Livestock judging gave me the ability to analyze and organize thoughts quickly and logically."
- "I learned to use quick judgment and how to speak out my opinion."

Over 97% (144 out of 152) of the respondents indicated that their Idaho 4-H judging experience had a positive influence on them, while less than 3% (4 out of 152) said that the judging program had no influence on them.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Judging in 4-H has been a popular program among Idaho youth for many years because it helps youth learn about animals and provides positive life experiences. Idaho judging alumni have identified participation in the Idaho 4-H Judging Program as a source for the development of the beneficial life skills of communication, decision-making, problem solving, self-discipline, self-motivation, teamwork and organization. Gaining animal industry knowledge and influencing personal success were also identified as major benefits of animal judging. All of these have proved to be important factors to the alumni in career preparation.

Judging animals has had lifelong effects on more than just the individuals that participated in the program. The 4-H program is facilitated by Cooperative Extension, and the results of this study verify the importance of the program in Idaho. It is the recommendation of the authors that judging activities continue as an important Extension program because the activities have had a positive impact on past participants.

Extension educators can continue to support these activities by providing an opportunity for youth to participate in judging. The participants will learn more than just animal-judging skills--they will learn about life. One respondent said it best, "Judging has proved to me that I can be something successful in life, no matter what it is. I have learned to dream big and achieve big."

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