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Leadership, Teaching, Self Efficacy, and Networking: Untapped Benefits of Membership in Extension Volunteer Networks

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Leadership, Teaching, Self Efficacy, and Networking: Untapped Benefits of Membership in Extension Volunteer Networks

Abstract

The Cooperative Extension Service has long been aware of the value of Extension service networks for developing women's skills in traditional home and family areas. Little is known about the relationship between leadership skills and these volunteer or service organizations. A study of Extension Homemakers/Community Educational Outreach Service (CEOS) groups was conducted to determine benefits of membership. Benefits can be categorized into four categories: leadership, teaching, personal efficacy, and networking. These surpass skill and knowledge gained about homemaking and parenting. Results suggest Extension should consider developing service groups throughout the country as "hothouses" for developing the leadership of volunteers, particularly women.

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Introduction

For nearly 90 years, a network of individuals in communities across West Virginia has strived to strengthen families through education, leadership, and volunteerism. In West Virginia, these groups were first called Farm Women's Clubs, but later changed their name to Home Demonstration Clubs, then to Extension Homemakers, and then again in 1998 to Community Educational Outreach Service (CEOS). Whatever their name, they have been a major source of service through volunteerism for Extension programs in West Virginia. The study described here identified benefits of membership in West Virginia's CEOS groups. The results of the study should give insights to leaders of similar Extension volunteer or service networks on how to develop programs that enhance outcomes for participants.

History of CEOS in West Virginia

In 1914, groups of rural women in West Virginia organized the first Farm Women's Club. At the same time, the West Virginia Extension Service, through the Smith-Lever Act of 1914, received a

charge to provide community groups with practical information on agriculture, home economics, and related subjects (Eagan, 2002). At that time, an alliance between the Farm Women's Club and Cooperative Extension was made. In 1998, this group became the West Virginia Community Educational Outreach Service, or CEOS (Eagan, 2002). CEOS is the primary service network associated with WVU Extension.

The Benefits of Volunteers Groups to Extension

The University of Wisconsin documented the scope and value of volunteers for state and local Cooperative Extension programs in a national study in 1984. The study, "Implications of Volunteerism for Extension," reported that the numbers of persons volunteering for Extension programs nationwide was more than 2.9 million. The value of the volunteers' time (based on \$8 an hour) was estimated at \$4.5 billion dollars, five times greater than the total Extension budget at the time the study was conducted (University of Wisconsin, 1984).

The Benefits of Service Organizations to Participants

There are many reasons why people join service organizations. CEOS promotional materials suggest that members gain up-to-date educational information on emerging issues such as public policy, parenting, health, nutrition and diet, and financial planning. Other benefits include leadership development, friendship, and social growth. Developing leadership skills and competencies in members of volunteer organizations is important to Extension because there is a positive relationship between participation in community groups and leadership in the community as well as political participation (Bolton, 1991).

Research Questions

The study was designed to answer the following questions

1. Do West Virginia CEOS members attribute improvements in certain skills to their participation in the CEOS group?
2. Do West Virginia CEOS members attribute higher confidence in performing certain skills to their participation in the CEOS group?
3. Do West Virginia CEOS members attribute the development of certain personal traits to their participation in CEOS?
4. Does the length of time a person is a member of a West Virginia CEOS group have an affect on improvement of skills, higher confidence levels, and attainment of certain personal traits?

Methods

In the spring of 2000, a team of Extension educators designed the research protocol. The survey instrument, a retrospective questionnaire, was piloted with an organization of past Extension Homemaker presidents in Cuming County, Nebraska. A team of Extension county-level educators then mailed the instrument to all CEOS members in 28 West Virginia counties. A total of 3, and there were 690 questionnaires were distributed 868 respondents, a 24% return. Non-respondents were not followed up to find out if they were different from respondents.

In column one of the questionnaire, CEOS members were asked to describe their current skills levels on a 4-point Likert scale, from very poor to very good. In column two, they were asked to describe the same skills before participating in CEOS. The skills included planning, leadership, parenting, serving on a committee, teaching CEOS lessons, facilitating CEOS lessons, homemaking, caring for young children, managing personal money, using a credit card, and speaking in a public forum.

CEOS members were then asked to respond to a series of questions that asked them to rate themselves in five personal traits on a retrospective scale. The traits included self-concept, level of independence, control of my personal life, interest in being a life-long learner, and willingness to accept responsibility.

Finally, CEOS members responded to retrospective questions about confidence in performing tasks currently and before membership in the CEOS group. The responses on the scale were not confident, somewhat confident, confident, and very confident. The tasks included planning a CEOS event, making organizational decisions, being a committee chairperson, serving on a committee, facilitating a CEOS lesson, teaching a CEOS lesson, completing homemaking tasks, controlling my own life and surroundings, being a CEOS officer, caring for children, handling money, using credit cards, and speaking in public.

Respondents were also asked a series of demographic questions, including employment status, gender, age, and length of participation in CEOS, ethnic background, marital status, and highest level of school completed. Their responses were used as independent variables in the analysis.

Results

Population

The majority of the respondents were married (67 percent), females (99.4 percent), over the age of 50 (87 percent), with a high school diploma (45%), and White/Non-Hispanic (95%). Almost two-thirds of the respondents were over the age of 60. Approximately one fourth had been in CEOS fewer than 6 years; however, over half had been in CEOS for more than 11 years.

Figure 1.
Age of Participants

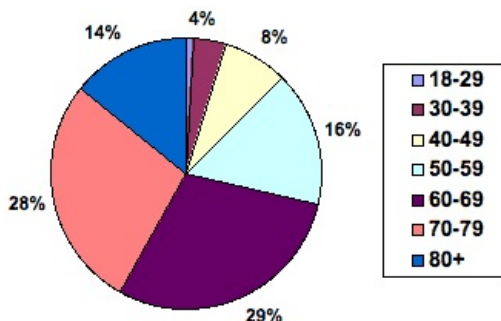


Figure 2.
Years in CEOS

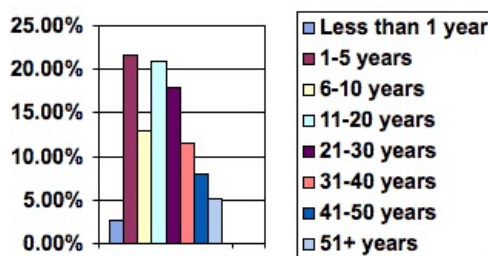
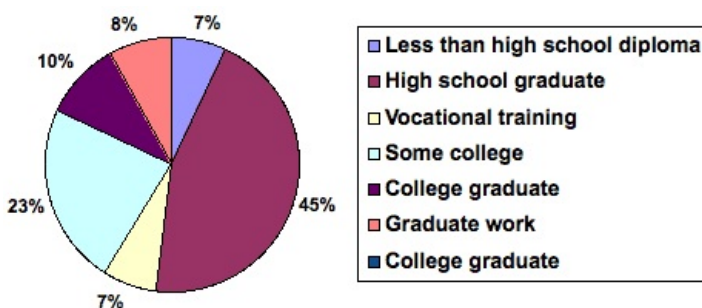


Figure 3.
Highest Level of Education



Improvements in Skill and Confidence Levels

To answer the question "Do CEOS members attribute their participation in CEOS to improvements in and higher confidence in performing certain skills as well as the development of personal traits?" paired sample T-tests were performed on all of the retrospective questions. T-tests test the hypothesis that a person's mean scores on the before list will be the same as the mean scores on the after list. All of the paired sample T-test results were significant to the .000 level.

The researchers believe that the reason the means were significantly different on every item may be that respondents couldn't adequately judge their skill and confidence levels before they joined the CEOS group because, in some cases, it was a very long time ago and, out of loyalty to the organization, they wanted the organization to appear successful. Therefore, the analysis was expanded to further discriminate between items. The difference between the means scores on the pre- and posttests were compared with those at .5 or higher selected (Table 1).

Table 1.
Difference in the Pre and Post Mean of .5 or Higher

Variable	Type	Difference in the Mean

Self-concept	Personal Traits	-.60
Interest in being a life-long learner	"	-.56
Confidence in public speaking	Confidence Level	-.79
Confidence in planning a CEOS event	"	-.75
Confidence in being a CEOS officer	"	-.67
Confidence in teaching a CEOS lesson	"	-.65
Confidence in being a committee chair	"	-.64
Confidence in facilitating a CEOS lesson	"	-.62
Confidence in making organizational decisions	"	-.58
Teaching CEOS lessons	Skill Levels	-.78
Public speaking skills	"	-.72
Leadership skills	"	-.71
Facilitating CEOS lessons	"	-.70
Committee membership skills	"	-.69
Planning skills	"	-.57

The shift from the negative categories to the positive categories was analyzed by collapsing the very poor and poor responses into one category and the good and very good responses into another category. The confidence categories were collapsed in the same way. Table 2 lists the items that had the largest increase in the percentage of those who said that their skills were good or very good before being a member of the CEOS group. Table 3 lists the items that had the largest increase in the percentage of those who said that their confidence in their ability to do tasks was confidence or very confident. All items on these lists are teaching or other leadership type tasks. Skills such as homemaking, caring for young children, managing personal money, and using a credit card do not appear in this list.

Table 2.
Largest Increases in the Percentage of Those with Good Skills Before and After Participation

Items	Increase in Percentage
Teaching CEOS lessons	+39.9%
Facilitating CEOS lessons	+37.6%
Leadership skills	+34.3%

Committee membership	+34.0%
Public speaking	+33.6%

Table 3.
Largest Increases in the Percentage of those with Confidence Levels of Confident or Very Confident after Participation

Items	Increase in Percentage
Planning a CEOS event	+33.0%
Making organizational decisions	+29.5%
Being a CEOS officer	+26.8%
Facilitating a CEOS lesson	+24.4%
Teaching a CEOS lesson	+24.4%

Length of Time in CEOS

For the remainder of the analysis, the post or the "after participation" responses were used as dependent variables to answer the question about whether years in CEOS can be attributed to more positive responses to the questions about skill level, confidence in doing tasks, and improvement in personal traits. A linear regression analysis was used, with "years in CEOS" as the independent variable. Table 4 shows the significant competency variables, meaning that as number of years in the CEOS increases, the answers to the following questions become more positive.

Table 4.
Significant Associations with "Years in CEOS"

Variable	R Square
Confidence in being a committee chairperson	.086**
Confidence in teach CEOS lessons	.064**
Confidence in serving on a committee	.058**
Confidence in being a CEOS officer	.046**
Ability to teach CEOS lessons	.029**
Confidence in facilitating CEOS lessons	.025**
Confidence in planning a CEOS event	.024**
Interest in being a life-long learner	.023**

Confidence in public speaking	.020**
Ability to facilitating CEOS lessons	.016**
Public speaking skills	.015**
Confidence in making organizational decisions	.016**
Attainment of leadership skills	.011**
Confidence in completing homemaking tasks	.008*
Willingness to accept responsibility after participation	.006*
*p<.05 **p<.02	

The variable "years in CEOS" was then coded into two categories: fewer than 6 years and 6 years or more. The results of Pearson Chi Square tests for the following variables showed there were significantly more people in the "6 years and more" category that answered very good on the skills questions and very confident on the task questions than expected (Table 5).

Table 5.
Membership of Six Years or More and Attainment of or Confidence in One's Ability to Do Certain Tasks

Variable	Pearson Chi-Square
Confidence in being a committee chairperson	50.376**
Confidence in teaching a CEOS lesson	37.155**
Confidence in serving on a committee	34.389**
Confidence in public speaking	16.246**
Confidence in planning a CEOS event	14.371**
Confidence in facilitating a CEOS lesson	13.146**
Teaching CEOS lessons skill	12.946**
Confidence in making organizational decisions	11.149**
Interest in being a life-long learner	9.679**
Confidence in completing homemaking tasks	8.545*

Confidence in being a CEOS officer	8.941*
*p=<.05 **p=<.02	

Benefits of CEOS Membership

Respondents were asked to respond to the following question, "Are there any ways in which you have benefited from the CEOS program? Please tell us about them." Using qualitative methodology, the responses were examined and coded. Table 6 shows the categories that emerged.

Table 6.
Ways Respondents Benefited from Membership in CEOS

Benefit	Number of Responses
Established friendships/networks	203
Learned information about healthcare, nutrition, crafts, etc.	141
Built self-confidence and other personal traits	80
Developed a desire for life-long learning	55
Became involved in community service	56
Gained leadership skills	47
Gained public speaking skills	26
Developed teaching skills	13

Discussion

Following is a discussion of respondents' answers to the research questions.

First, do CEOS members attribute improvements in certain skills to their participation in the CEOS group? Respondents indicated that they credit their CEOS experience to increased skill level in teaching and facilitating CEOS lessons, public speaking skills, leadership skills, committee membership skills, and planning skills. They do not give as much credit to their CEOS experience for the development of skills in managing personal money, using a credit card, parenting, homemaking, and caring for young children.

Second, do CEOS members attribute higher confidence in performing certain skills to their participation in the CEOS group? Respondents indicated that because of their experience in CEOS they were more confident in public speaking, planning a CEOS event, being a CEOS officer, teaching and facilitating a CEOS lesson, being a committee chair, and making organizational decisions.

Third, do CEOS members attribute the development of certain personal traits to their participation in CEOS? Respondents seemed to attribute the following personal traits to their participation in CEOS: improved self-concept and interest in being a life-long learner.

Fourth, does the length of time a person is a member of CEOS have an affect on improvement of skills, higher confidence levels, and attainment of certain personal traits? We have shown through the use of regression and Chi-Square analysis that years of participation in CEOS seemed to have an effect on whether they attribute skills, confidence level, and attributes to their membership. Those who had been members of CEOS groups for longer periods of time were more likely to say that they have gained skills in teaching and facilitating CEOS lessons, leadership, and public speaking and that they gained confidence in being a CEOS officer, planning a CEOS event, making

organizational decisions, and facilitating and teaching CEOS lessons, and participating as a committee member.

We placed the areas of greatest gain or benefit into four categories; leadership (committee membership, holding an office, public speaking), teaching (CEOS lesson teaching and facilitating, planning CEOS events), personal efficacy (self-confidence, life-long learning), and networking.

Answers to an open-ended question about other benefits of membership in CEOS groups confirmed the quantitative analysis, except on one important point. The quantitative questions did not ask respondents to rate the importance of networking and making new friendships. When the qualitative materials were coded, this was found to be an oversight. Networking and making new friendships appears to be a very important benefit of the CEOS experience.

Implications for Extension

The Cooperative Extension Service has long been aware of the value of developing the home and family skills of members of service groups, particularly women. However, the value of these service groups for preparing members for leadership positions may have been overlooked. The results of this study show that even older members, those who had been involved in a West Virginia CEOS group for many years, attributed their skill and knowledge about public speaking, committee participation, and teaching to membership in CEOS more frequently than they did their skill and knowledge about homemaking and parenting.

The results of this study challenge Extension to consider developing volunteer groups throughout the country like CEOS to become "hothouses" for developing leadership skills in volunteers, particularly young women. This would mean a change of image and programming. But it would not require a change in mission: "to strengthen families through education, leadership, and volunteerism."

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