

6-1-2005

Documenting Impact Is Possible When Working with Camp Program Youth Leaders

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Recommended Citation

Hines, S., & Riley, L. (2005). Documenting Impact Is Possible When Working with Camp Program Youth Leaders. *The Journal of Extension*, 43(3), Article 23. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol43/iss3/23>

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Documenting Impact Is Possible When Working with Camp Program Youth Leaders

Abstract

Showing impact for working with camp youth leaders can be difficult. There is often the idea that Extension faculty at camp are just taking it easy and no real outcomes are being achieved. The leadership program described here has allowed the documentation of impact and show outcomes for time devoted to working with youth. Through a retrospective pre-post survey and open-ended questions, the faculty document the leadership skills knowledge gained based on responses to specific selected leadership traits. Not only can this change in knowledge be documented, the faculty can use the responses to tailor future leadership trainings.

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Introduction

University of Idaho Extension, along with other state and federal agencies, conduct a camp for youth ages 12-14, the Natural Resources Workshop (NRW). The focus of NRW is educating youth on the conservation and wise use of natural resources. Although NRW is not a typical 4-H camping program, the non-formal activities are similar, including ballgames, hiking, shooting sports, fishing, campfires, cabin competitions, and more. Also similar to other camps, NRW uses teens to supervise the cabins and help conduct non-formal programming. At NRW, these youth are called "Cabin Leaders."

Before Extension professionals became involved, a new group of Cabin Leaders was brought to camp each year. These youth received no training and were instructed minute-to-minute by two adults hired as counselors. There was no chain of command, and the program was in jeopardy because of a lack of leadership. At the same time, Extension administration was looking hard at all programs statewide to see where cuts could be made in light of tightening budgets and reduced personnel. Because no evaluation data was being collected, there were questions as to whether Extension faculty time was necessary for this program.

Program Development

After a year of observation, while participating in other duties at the camp, the Extension faculty involved in restructuring the program knew the value of allowing the teens to participate as Cabin Leaders. The difficulty was going to be developing a program that would build leadership skills and provide an opportunity to collect data. It was from this challenge that the current Cabin Leader model was devised.

Training would first be necessary for the youth leaders. It was not practical, nor wise from a liability standpoint, to bring the teens to camp and let them supervise other young people without some

preparation. A 12-hour training program was developed. The handbook for the Cabin Leaders was also revised and expanded to give the youth a reference to review and study.

The youth meet on 2 separate days for 6 hours each day. They participate in training, planning, and role-play activities. Primary points of the training include team building, learning about ages and stages, improving communication, and developing critical thinking skills.

In order to develop the proper training, it had to be determined which leadership skills the youth should learn and practice. The Targeting Life Skills model developed by Iowa State University Extension is a ready-made list of potential skills. While all 35 of the listed skills are important, the Cabin Leader program focuses on 15 selected leadership skills. These were chosen because of their relevance to the camping program and the Cabin Leaders' activities.

Program Structure

Extension faculty took the role as adult counselors and supervisors of the Cabin Leaders at camp. This made the program progress logically from Cabin Leader selection to training, implementation, camp observation, and evaluation. This structure also gives a solid chain of command from the Cabin Leaders through the Extension faculty to the camp director.

The Cabin Leader program has become successful because there is one channel of communication and the Extension faculty and teens have a good rapport developed before they ever get to camp. The teens are part of the adult staff team at camp. They take their role seriously because they are part of the adult structure and not just some "kids" stuck somewhere between the adults and the campers.

Another change was to allow the teens to return more than one time as a Cabin Leader. This has allowed the returning Cabin Leaders to build confidence and experience. This also made the job of the Extension faculty easier because everything isn't new to the Cabin Leaders each year. The returning teens learn what is expected and how to do their job with confidence and pride. The ability to return, learn new things and expand on existing knowledge has increased the leadership skills of the youth involved.

Program Evaluation

In addition to the Cabin Leader program, an evaluation tool was developed to document the impact of the training program.

Evaluation Tool

A simple pre-post test was developed listing the 15 chosen leadership skills. The youth ranked themselves using a five-point Likert scale. This was a difficult task for the youth, and results showed them ranking themselves lower in the post-test. Presumably, this was because they realized their skills were not as developed as they had first thought. One positive outcome is a better realization of self, based on this experiential learning.

Evaluation Tools Revised

A retrospective pre-post test was then developed. The youth were asked to determine how much, if any, their specific leadership skills had improved as a result of their involvement with the camp. This method has proven to be much more useful in supplying impact data. On a yearly basis, with only 14-16 youth involved, there is not a large enough population to obtain sound statistical data.

Another difficulty was the realization that the retrospective pre-post test was only beneficial for 1 year's data. Returning Cabin Leaders taking the same test was not a reliable option. A battery of questions was developed. Those teens returning to camp for 2 or more years were asked to fill out the open ended questions. These related generally to their perception of how involvement as a Cabin Leader has helped them improve leadership skills. This information has proven valuable for qualitative data. The youth were able to explain in their own words what the cabin leader experience had offered for them.

Summary

This Cabin Leader program allows Extension faculty to document the impact of working with youth at an Extension supported camping activity and to date has helped 31 teens develop leadership skills and their own leadership style. Through the documentation, justification can be made for allocating Extension resources to the Natural Resources Workshop.

References

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