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## Why They Come, Why They Go, and Why They Stay: Factors Affecting Volunteerism in 4-H Programs

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## Why They Come, Why They Go, and Why They Stay: Factors Affecting Volunteerism in 4-H Programs

### Abstract

The 4-H program depends on the work of thousands of adult volunteers. It seems prudent to understand more about the factors involved in an adult becoming a leader, factors contributing to the leader having a positive experience, and, in particular, the factors causing the leader to end his or her role. In order to better understand the experience of 4-H leaders and the factors contributing to their success, an exit survey was conducted with individuals who had terminated their leadership role. Key reasons for volunteering and leaving are identified.

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### Introduction

Volunteers are an integral part of Oregon State University Extension educational program delivery (Braker, Leno, Pratt, & Grobe, 2000). This is especially true in 4-H, where the implementation of programs relies almost exclusively on the work of thousands of dedicated adult volunteers. In Oregon alone there are more than 7,200 volunteers committing time and resources to the mission of 4-H (Braker, Leno, Pratt, & Grobe, 2000).

Even though 4-H programs rely heavily on volunteer leaders, little research has explored the nature of a volunteer's experience as a 4-H leader. Given the important role volunteers play in implementing 4-H programs, it seems prudent to understand more about the:

- Factors involved in an adult becoming a 4-H leader,
- Factors that contribute to the leader's positive experience, and
- Factors that cause a leader to end his or her role.

In order to understand these factors better, a study was conducted in Deschutes County, Oregon with individuals who had ended their role as a 4-H leader.

Deschutes County, located in the southern part of the Deschutes River Basin, east of the Cascades Mountains in central Oregon, has a population approaching 120,000 (Deschutes County Resource Profile, 2000). The county is recognized as the fastest growing county in Oregon. The estimated population change between 1990 and 1999 was 42.3% (Bradbury, 2001).

Little more than 5% of the population is considered ethnically diverse (Population Research Center, 1993). There are more than 21,000 youth in the K through 12 school systems. Nearly 30% of the youth are engaged in after school programming (Community Youth Connection, 2001). The county's largest urban center is Bend, with a population of just over 50,000. Deschutes County represents a mixture of rural and urban lifestyles. More than 82% of the land is publicly owned,

and less than 8% of the land is in farms (Deschutes County Resource Profile, 2000). The 4-H program enrolls more than 1,100 members and relies on 300 volunteers who support more than 130 project clubs.

## **Problem Statement**

The county 4-H agent plays a key role in the recruitment and retention of volunteer leaders. With such a high reliance on volunteers to implement programs, there is a necessary level of care, education, and support that must be provided by the agent to ensure the volunteer's success. At the same time, the agent is increasingly called upon to address the perpetual needs and expectations of current clientele while attempting to answer the call of prospective clientele needing new and innovative programming.

One of the key factors in successfully managing these complex demands is a stable and satisfied group of volunteers. It becomes clear then, that understanding the factors involved in becoming a 4-H volunteer, the experience of the person while serving as a volunteer, and the reasons for leaving the volunteer role can provide insights useful to the agent in managing the volunteer portion of the county 4-H program.

Three key questions are involved in this understanding. First, what motivates adults to choose to become 4-H leaders? Second, what factors are involved in a leader's decision to end his or her role? And, third, does the level of support from the Extension staff and office play a role in a leader deciding to end his or her role? Answers to these questions will help in understanding the root incentives and impediments to volunteering, which in turn will help build a county program sensitive to the needs and interests of volunteers.

## **The Experience of Volunteering**

Braker et al. (2000) sought to disclose personal, economic, and community benefits volunteers received as a result of their involvement with Extension volunteer programs. Volunteers reported that the ability to help others and the satisfaction they received from helping others were two of the main benefits received from volunteering. Respondents also reported gaining personal benefits by working with youth, spending time with their own children, and helping kids learn. Braker et al. found that volunteers were motivated by a desire to contribute and to feel good about themselves rather than by extrinsic benefits. In addition, achievement, affiliation, and power needs appear also to be important determinants of performance and success in work and volunteering (Maehr & Braskamp, 1986).

Similarly, Rouse, and Clawson (1992) found that both youth and adult volunteers were equally motivated to volunteer because of the high importance of affiliation. In addition, Rouse found that volunteers enjoy helping others and meeting and working with other volunteers and appreciate the warmth, friendliness, caring, and concern of fellow volunteers. And Wolford, Cox, and Culp (2001) found that volunteers want to be affiliated with the organization and the people in the program in addition to learning new things.

## **Methodology**

Using enrollment data, volunteers who had left the Deschutes County 4-H program during the last 6 years were identified. Three hundred and thirty-one potential participants were identified. Current valid addresses established a sample population of 160 volunteers. A letter of informed consent, a survey instrument, and a self-addressed and stamped envelope were mailed to each person identified in the sample. Reminder postcards followed 2 week later. All surveys returned within 30 days were analyzed to gather frequencies, mean scores, ranges, and standard deviations. A total of 51 surveys were returned for a response rate of 31%.

The researchers developed the survey for the study based on anecdotal evidence from conversations with 4-H leaders and agents. Following initial development, 4-H agents in each of Oregon's 36 counties as well as the Deschutes County 4-H Executive Council reviewed the survey to establish face and content validity. Based on the review, modifications were made to increase the validity of the survey prior to distribution.

The first seven questions collected demographic data regarding the nature of the leader's participation. The next section asked respondents to rate on a scale of 1-5 their reasons for becoming a 4-H Leader and reasons for leaving their role as a leader. An answer of 1 indicated that statement was "not a reason," while an answer of 5 indicated that the statement was a "major reason." In addition, respondents were asked to rate their experience with the County 4-H Program on a scale of 1-5. An answer of 1 indicated a response of "strongly agree," and an answer of "5" indicated "strongly disagree."

Following data collection, Cronbach's Alphas were run on each of the 3 subscales to establish internal validity. Alphas for two of the scales, "experience with the County 4-H program" and "reasons for leaving," were sufficient to establish internal reliability (.84 and .78, respectively). Internal reliability for the third scale, "reasons for becoming a 4-H leader" was an Alpha of .31. Because of the low internal reliability, a factor analysis was conducted on the scale to determine if there were multiple dimensions of the scale. The factor analysis indicated that one item, "My

employer rewards volunteering," should be dropped from the scale.

A second factor analysis was then conducted without this item. The results of the second analysis revealed three separate components that explain reasons for volunteering in 4-H programs. The largest component centered on the altruistic nature of doing volunteer work and the desire to make a difference in the lives of youth. The second component revealed a group of respondents who volunteered because they had time to do so or because they hoped that volunteering would lead to a paying job. The third component centered on a group of volunteers whose children were involved in 4-H, and thus they stepped forward into the role of 4-H volunteer.

The results of the factor analysis show that the reasons people become volunteers are multidimensional, which is consistent with other research examining reasons for volunteering (e.g., Clary, Snyder, Ridge, Copeland, Stukas, Haugen, & Miene, 1998).

## Results

Making a difference in the lives of youth and receiving satisfaction through helping others were the top reasons why adults became 4-H leaders. This was followed closely by the fact that the leader had children involved in 4-H. Other reasons included not being able to refuse a need and enjoying volunteer work (Table 1).

**Table 1.**  
Reasons for Becoming a 4-H Leader

	<b>N</b>	<b>Min.</b>	<b>Max.</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
Make a difference in youths' lives	48	1	5	4.40	0.84
Satisfaction of helping others	47	1	5	4.28	0.88
Child(ren) was/were in 4-H	48	1	5	4.27	1.50
There was a need, could not refuse	47	1	5	3.62	1.51
Enjoyed volunteer work itself	47	1	5	3.57	1.28
Sense of duty	46	1	5	3.07	1.57
Increase skills in youth development	47	1	5	2.53	1.35
Increase knowledge in specific area	46	1	5	2.00	1.40
To use 4-H curricula in home school	46	1	5	1.52	1.21
Employer rewarded volunteering	46	1	4	1.15	0.60
Had nothing else to do	46	1	3	1.11	0.43
Hoped it would lead to paying job	46	1	3	1.11	0.43

The number one reason why 4-H leaders left their role as a 4-H leader was because their children were no longer involved in 4-H. The second and third reasons for leaving were because of time demands (Table 2).

**Table 2.**  
Reasons for Leaving Role as a 4-H Leader

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	<b>N</b>	<b>Min.</b>	<b>Max.</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
Child(ren) no longer in 4-H	45	1	5	3.58	1.80
Time demands increased	44	1	5	3.30	1.65
Required too much time	44	1	5	2.39	1.47
Level of project members commitment	44	1	5	2.09	1.39
Level of cooperation from parents	44	1	5	2.09	1.49
Level of support from leaders	44	1	5	2.02	1.41
Competing time demands	45	1	5	2.00	1.60
Position valued by other 4-H community members	42	1	5	1.81	1.25
Responsiveness to particular needs	43	1	5	1.79	1.28
Level of county Extension support	44	1	5	1.77	1.16
Amount of paperwork	43	1	5	1.72	1.20
Demands on personal finance	43	1	5	1.70	1.15
Quality, age of materials available	43	1	4	1.49	0.94
4-H program not addressing community's needs	43	1	4	1.42	0.85
No county Extension staff to provide leadership	43	1	3	1.40	0.76

Regarding the leader's experience with the County 4-H Program, it is clear that more work could be done to enhance the leader's experience. The mean scores for each of the questions in this area ranged between 2.24 and 2.54 (Table 3). It is important to note, however, that the leader's experience with the County 4-H Program did not emerge as a primary reason for the leader's leaving his or her volunteer role.

**Table 3.**  
Experience with the County 4-H Program

	<b>N</b>	<b>Min.</b>	<b>Max.</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
Received adequate training	48	1	5	2.44	1.05
Received needed guidance	47	1	4	2.19	0.88

Efforts as leader appreciated	47	1	5	2.45	1.02
Expectations as a leader met	47	1	5	2.17	0.84
Understood role of 4-H Youth Development Agent	47	1	5	2.40	1.10
Understood role of other county 4-H staff	48	1	5	2.38	0.96
Personal volunteer service was worthwhile	47	1	5	1.81	1.12

### Conclusions and Impact

The results of the inquiry shed an interesting light on the nature of volunteers in 4-H. One might assume that the primary reason an adult becomes involved in 4-H is because his or her children are in 4-H. But this is only one of three top reasons that emerged. Equally important is the desire to make a difference in the lives of youth and receiving satisfaction for doing so.

This finding has interesting implications for the recruitment of 4-H volunteers. We may want to emphasize that those who desire to make a difference, whether or not they have 4-H age children, can fill the role of a 4-H leader. An increased emphasis needs to be placed on helping leaders understand the impact on youth regardless of family ties.

In addition, factor analysis of the survey instrument revealed three separate clusters of motivations for becoming a 4-H leader. These results could have tremendous implication for the type of programming needed to support 4-H volunteers, depending on the leader's reason for volunteering in the first place.

Reasons why leaders left their role were less surprising. It makes sense in these busy times that time pressures override any continued involvement in 4-H once the leader's children are no longer involved. Given this, there may be ways to look at the role of a 4-H leader that takes the time pressure into consideration. It may be time to look more closely at the expectations and time requirements of being a volunteer to see if new and innovative changes can be made to the traditional role. Perhaps leader duties can be assigned that require smaller but equally meaningful roles.

In addition, understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the leader/4-H relationship can help define what can be improved for greater partnerships with volunteers. It is a given that we can expect many volunteers to retire when their children leave 4-H. Programs need to be innovative and meaningful for youth to remain.

Finally, the results of this survey indicate that more attention might need to be paid to the relationship between the county Extension office and the 4-H leaders. It is important to note that the respondents in this study are those who left the program, and the support provided from the county Extension office was not listed as one of the main reasons for terminating their role as a leader.

Nonetheless, the responses to the questions regarding knowledge and support indicate that there could be better programmatic emphasis and education in this area. Given the weak responses to these questions, it behooves us to look more closely at how the Extension office interacts with, educates, and supports its volunteers. After all, without adult volunteers we have no 4-H program.

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