

12-1-2003

Doorway, Doormat, or Doghouse? The Challenges Facing 4-H Youth Development Scholarship in Land-Grant Universities

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Recommended Citation

Astroth, K. A. (2003). Doorway, Doormat, or Doghouse? The Challenges Facing 4-H Youth Development Scholarship in Land-Grant Universities. *The Journal of Extension*, 41(6), Article 2.
<https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol41/iss6/2>

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December 2003 // Volume 41 // Number 6 // Commentary // 6COM1



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Abstract

Beginning with establishment of a 4-H professional research and knowledge base in 1986, to the recent launch of an on-line master's degree in youth development by a consortium of land-grant universities, to the implementation of the U.S. Department of Labor's certificate in youth development, youth development has attained recognition as a discipline with an identified academic base. Land-grant universities should join the effort to enhance the scholarship of 4-H youth development professionals, not stifle it. The challenge is to identify appropriate standards and definitions of scholarship. This article presents some of the challenges facing 4-H youth development scholarship in land-grant universities.

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While the dogs bark, the caravan moves on.
--Arab Proverb

County Extension offices are often lauded as the portals, or the local doorways, to the land-grant university. Even those most insular within the "ivory tower" of land-grant universities recognize the valuable contributions of Extension to student recruitment and public support. And when Extension needs to have its bacon saved, it usually turns to 4-H to muster the political support to protect its funding base. Yet, in academic circles, 4-H continues to suffer from the Rodney Dangerfield Syndrome: 4-H doesn't get any respect.

As recent events have shown, 4-H is good enough to save Extension's funding, but not good enough for the academy. In fact, 4-H often gets treated as a doormat in the academy, or worse--banished to the doghouse. For example, the University of Massachusetts (a land grant) recently decided to cut all funding for 4-H outreach in favor of funding research and teaching because these two functions were considered more "core" to the mission of the university (Burge, 2003). Such pronouncements are filled with much pointless woofing designed to distract any rigorous scrutiny. Meanwhile, the caravan moves on.

Not surprisingly, some have begun to question whether UMass is renegeing on its land-grant mission by cutting out 4-H youth development from Extension outreach. And this action comes despite evidence like a survey at Purdue University that found that more than 50% of the incoming freshmen class in the School of Agriculture were former 4-H members (Goecker, 2001).

De-Institutionalizing 4-H Professionals

Sadly, among certain circles of Extension and university administrators, there is a misguided and pernicious belief that 4-H faculty certainly are not scholarly and should be accorded neither academic rank nor tenure. As a result, universities have tried to "de-affiliate" 4-H youth professionals, removing all semblances of academic rank and tenure. As a result, 4-H professionals who once enjoyed academic status that distinguished them from other youth development practitioners find themselves cut off from academia like some pariah class. Meanwhile, the caravan moves on. Those who would try and turn the clock backwards remain tethered back in camp, barking and howling.

In other cases, there have been attempts to "de-professionalize" the ranks of 4-H youth development professionals, substituting paraprofessionals or program assistants where once full-time faculty provided program leadership. After all, "anyone can do 4-H work," or so the saying goes. Meanwhile, the rest of the nation moves on. Woof, woof.

Because of 4-H's unique ties to the land-grant universities, land-grant universities have an opportunity to give visionary leadership to the field of youth development. Instead, it appears that land-grant universities like UMass are going in the opposite direction. Ironically, though, increasing the scholarly status of 4-H professionals will only serve to enhance the engaged university's standing in the public eye. Eliminating this status or leaving 4-H professionals outside the hallowed walls of the academy will not. Clearly, on the national level, the field of youth development is moving in the opposite direction. (See, for example, the recent report of the National Research Council, 2002). Universities should be leading this movement, not stifling it.

4-H Youth Development's Academic Foundations

The academic credentials and foundations for 4-H youth development work are strong. Since 1986, the 4-H professional research and knowledge taxonomy has provided a scholarly and theoretical framework for this kind of work. The taxonomy was deemed important enough to include in the AGRICOLA database and has been added to and updated ever since (National Association of Extension 4-H Agents, 1994). The taxonomy is used in many states as a basis for designing job descriptions, performance evaluation, and professional development plans.

This past year, a consortium of land-grant universities involved with the Great Plains Interactive Distance Education Alliance pooled resources to offer the first ever on-line master's degree and graduate certificate in youth development, giving added credence to youth development's scholarly foundations as a discipline and a profession <<http://www.gpidea.org>>. These universities are giving leadership to professionalizing youth development work that will further elevate the field.

Most recently, the U.S. Department of Labor has weighed in on the future importance of the youth development field by identifying "youth development" as one of over 850 apprenticeable occupations <<http://www.levitan.org/ydpa>>. Since the apprenticeship model has only recently been adapted to occupations in the social services, several national organizations were awarded competitive grants to develop, register, and implement youth development practitioner apprenticeship certificate programs through the U.S. Department of Labor. 4-H was one of those organizations receiving a grant <<http://www.nae4ha.org>>.

Challenges to Articulating Youth Development Scholarship

Across the nation, more enlightened Extension leadership has called upon 4-H to define and articulate appropriate standards for scholarship in the field of youth development. Because of 4-H's diverse expectations, 4-H professionals within even a state or county often have widely varying job descriptions. These differences in expectations result in gradients of scholarship--some have higher scholarly expectations than others and thus more freedom of action and thought. Some are on tenure and promotion tracks; others are not. These kinds of uniquenesses must be accounted for and included in any articulation of youth development scholarship. That is the challenge, and it remains largely unresolved.

The National Association of Extension 4-H Agents has waded into this challenge. It's taking a leading role to articulate scholarship for 4-H professionals and define it in ways that are appropriate and relevant through the development of a concept paper that has been endorsed by both NAE4-HA and the National 4-H Leadership Trust. "4-H Youth Development: Scholarship in an Engaged University--A Blueprint for the Future" was also selected for presentation at the 2003 Outreach Scholarship Conference in Madison, Wisconsin in October 2003 <<http://www1.uwex.edu/outreach/presentations.cfm>>.

By describing the importance of 4-H youth development scholarship and giving examples within the four categories described by Boyer (1990), we can begin to change the culture of promotion and tenure within land-grant universities. Moreover, we can also enhance the credential of 4-H youth development professionals who are an integral component of Extension, but who are often regarded as less than scholarly practitioners, unworthy of academic status.

What we need today is a more validated and inclusive view of what it means to be a 4-H youth development scholar. This will mean a change in university culture (Lerner & Simon, 1998; McDowell, 2001) that we believe must begin with organizations like the National Association of Extension 4-H Agents, the Joint Council of Extension Professionals (JCEP), and the National 4-H Leadership Trust (Small & Bogenschneider, 1998). This work has already begun.

Leading the Caravan or Just Barking?

Clearly, the future lies in strengthening the scholarly attributions of 4-H professionals, not weakening their connection to land-grant universities. Nationally, the caravan is moving on. Youth development is becoming more professionalized. Youth development is being recognized as a discipline worthy of consideration as scholarly. Others are anxious to fill the void if universities

won't help lead the movement to credential youth development professionals.

Land-grant universities should partner with 4-H professionals in the effort to enhance the scholarship of 4-H youth development professionals. This connection to scholarship, after all, is what makes 4-H different from Scouts, Boys and Girls Clubs, the Y's, and all the other youth development organizations across the country. It's our scholarly edge, and we should take every opportunity to hone it. Let's hope that land-grant universities are not left behind, yipping and barking in camp, as the rest of the nation travels over the horizon and into the future.

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Discussion

Author: [Carolyn Blake](#)

As a student in the GP Idea masters in youth development program, and as an AP Extension Coordinator, I strongly defend the academic professionalism associated with youth development. The first course offered through the GP Idea was on Community Youth Development. In my final integration paper, I proposed that a youth development professional position should be funded in every county to coordinate youth/community development efforts and programs. I further proposed that Extension Offices were the ideal choice for these positions. The cost of one professional's salary is far less than the cost of just one youth in our juvenile justice system. It is more than a service, it is a sound investment.

There is extensive research from a wide range of fields including psychology, sociology, human development, education, and physiology that are interwoven into the theories and practices of Positive Youth Development and Community Youth Development.

With approximately forty students in the first class of the GP Idea youth development program, Extension and 4-H professionals were well represented. The 4-H program itself is in many ways already a model of Positive Youth Development and of Community Youth Development in its approaches and practices. Land Grant Universities are well positioned to take the lead in the movement toward professionalism in youth development. Not to do so would be sheer folly.

Date: 12/15/2003

Author: Dale Leidheiser

Kirk,
First, I appreciate your thoughts and insights on this topic and the opportunity for greater dialogue.

In systems where rank and tenure are not an integral part of the youth development program, scholarship is, by and large, not identified in position descriptions or a part of performance appraisal. Agents in these situations feel the scholarship is an added, and perhaps unneeded, responsibility. We have, at best, omitted information in position descriptions about the full scope of responsibility of 4-H youth development professionals, including scholarship, to new applicants. Our clientele see agents working on events and activities, organizing training sessions, solving problems, and other assorted work but don't have an understanding of those other "duties as assigned."

As our own worst enemy, we have had colleagues who assail the university for requiring a level of evaluation, impact and accountability of their work. They say, "my work is in the county and these other requirements keep me from doing my job." We have given lip service to research based information as the foundation of our curriculum and waffle between using it when it's convenient and relying upon personal beliefs when it's not.

In my own experience of working in a system where an academic home was part of the job and getting tenure was the only way to keep it, there was continual emphasis on evaluation and sharing the results. While there were challenges in dealing with the academic department and its committees, the time demands of publishing, and working on the documentation required for promotion, the benefits came in the form of shared information and programs which benefitted other professionals.

One of the larger challenges we face is the location of an academic home. Should it be in Human Development? Education? Adult Education? Continuing Education? Communications? Business and Management? Social work? How many campus based departments would be open to, or understanding of, 4-H youth development professionals? I don't think we "fit" very well in existing tenure and promotion systems or would fare very well in their reviews. Given the multi-disciplinary, community based work of extension professionals, how can we advocate for a different model? True peer review can best be accomplished by an academic department comprised of those engaged in, and understanding of, community youth development - 4-H professionals. While there are hurdles to be cleared in establishing new departments, it would be the best possible situation for our profession.

Ultimately, I think the long term benefits of recognizing and supporting scholarship and improving institutional ties are worth tackling the challenges. We have an opportunity to face these challenges and change the face of our land grant universities.

Date: 12/15/2003

Author: [Kirk A. Astroth](#)

Hello Dale,

Good points all and I appreciate your thoughtful input. 4-H as its own department (such as exists at Oregon State, among others) is in my estimation the best alternative because you're right--we don't fit in other areas very well. And I would disagree with George McDowell (see his book, p.147) that by being our own department that we can't be integrated with other disciplines on campus.

Regardless of position, title or academic rank, all of us working in 4-H youth development must pay attention to scholarship. It's the only thing that distinguishes us from dilettantes. But you are also correct--we need to be upfront about this in our job announcements and position descriptions.

As long as we remain the "cooperative" extension service, while some people may feel their "job is in the county," it is also funded and supported by at least two other partners--the state and USDA. And as long as we retain our academic ties to land-grant universities, all of us must see ourselves as responsible for taking the university to the people--and that means scholarship. We must break out of the activity trap; we must quit seeing that as our only job.

As I wrote in my paper on scholarship: "All Extension staff have an obligation to link community needs and university expertise, thus giving relevance to scholarship. Without connecting our everyday practice to academic scholarship, we risk being merely dilettantes masquerading as experts. Obviously, not every Extension agent needs to be a research scholar, just as not every college faculty member must be such a scholar. But every Extension professional needs to be a scholar of application, accessing and applying scholarship to inform and improve everyday practice."

Additionally: "At the same time, though, just conducting excellent 4-H programs does not constitute any kind of scholarship. Or worse, waiting around for the phone to ring, running livestock auctions, or weighing and tagging steers, is not even considered a program. Programs are planned educational efforts based on the needs of people. The scholarly practitioner designs these planned educational programs to take advantage of their own or others' scholarship."

You raise good points and hope to learn from the feedback of others in this forum. Thanks for taking the time to share your thoughts.

Date: 12/16/2003

Author: Jan Scholl

In the 1980s, Dr. Mary Greenwood, Administrator ES/USDA, authorized and funded a national study of attitudes and perceptions of state leaders, program leaders and specialists to "Strengthen the Research Base for Extension Programs." In response to the findings of the study, Don Stormer (1986) reported that the home economics and 4-H research bases were sufficiently inadequate to ensure the future viability of these programs.

George McDowell, in his 2001 book, "Land-Grant Universities and Extension into the 21st Century" noted that there has always been a distortion regarding the intellectual investment in 4-H programming. In his words, "we always knew more about the calves and other animals than we did about the kids" (p. 165).

In my estimation, what is not being said about Extension scholarship has to do with what we know to be true and how we are applying it in programs. In the movie, *Born Yesterday*, the character played by Melanie Griffith, found that people in government were doing a lot of talking about great writings; quoting this study and that, touting new initiatives, but very few knew the basis of those studies or the purpose of the initiatives. Most people acted on their perceptions and what their boss and everyone else said was important.

The *Journal of Extension* captures much of the scholarship about extension. (How many of us read more than one or two articles a month?) But, it is not the only place scholarship about extension exists (Read any reports from Agricultural Experiment Station projects lately?) nor should it be.

For the past few years, I have been working with the National Ag Library (NAL) to catalog documents about the 4-H: national program intern reports, ECOP 4-H minutes, and staff, development training materials. Most of these, unfortunately, are headed for the dumpster or will be cataloged together never to be found again--because there are not mechanisms (and funding) in place that will secure our scholarship. Many Extension bulletins and reports are not being sent to land-grant libraries or NAL anymore.

To prove that McDowell was wrong about the dearth of 4-H research, I compiled and analyzed 1550 theses and dissertations about 4-H, spanning 93 years. These studies are from 130 institutions world-wide and include wonderful information not only about project topics, but about adolescent development and needs, family issues, competition and recognition--even things not commonly known about 4-H history.

It is important to create new scholarship, but what do we really know about the "research based" scholarship that exists? Shouldn't there be a systematic approach to developing studies that fill the gaps in our knowledge? Shouldn't we value scholarship enough to make sure it is in a location that people can find and use? I think so.

Date: 1/22/2004

Author: Anonymous

I have put off writing this, but see that others are still responding, so I add this to the mix:

Over the years, I have seen a lot of 4-H faculty that have not reached tenure because 1) they couldn't publish enough or otherwise meet the requirements of tenure or 2) because they "ignored" their extension responsibilities (extension educators wrote letters to the administration complaining about them). The tenure route for 4-H specialists in particular is a very difficult one.

Extension has created "models" to help 4-H faculty reach tenure, but so often this results in the their having to fulfill the model as well all the publishing requirements of other tenure-track faculty. 4-H faculty on a tenured track are often given graduate students so they can be "included as authors" on a piece that they might have to spent days or weeks trying to get the student to work on.

Unlike many other faculty, 4-H faculty not only need to be excellent writers for the scientific community, but for youth of all ages and adult volunteers with varying degrees of education. They must use "hands on" teaching to train agents, students in academic settings and be seen as the state's (if not the world's) greatest expert on youth development as well as another discipline or two.

Many of them spend hours a day answering questions about programs and curricula (which never seems to count toward tenure). Many still travel out to communities to do workshops as well as write for radio, produce television, have web-sites, write grants and the list goes on. Sure non-tenured faculty and agents do this, too (Are we nuts?) but tenured faculty are under the pressure to so much more, under a limited amount of time and be excellent at everything. Also, the problems of maintaining a respected position in a department once tenure is reached is something else again.

4-H faculty are evaluated by everyone: peers, peers outside of the state, agents, administrators, youth, students. Once I was evaluated by my own secretary and this evaluation was part of my tenure packet!

Despite the lip service to reduce the load for faculty, I believe no 4-H program is ever truly dropped for an individual until they quit! Considering our economic times and cut-backs, it is also not unusual for a state 4-H leader or department head to add a project taking 3 or more months to plan and execute with less than 3 weeks notice. Once that program is executed, the program is attached to the person, like a label. How many times can a faculty member rescheduled personal and family time? How many times does a person need to work nights and weekends to TRY to catch up? (The answer, my friend, is blowing in the wind....)

I am not saying that 4-H faculty should not be tenured. But, isn't it the status the organization is seeking here? Status is important, but are we humiliating and demoralizing people (working them to death)to elevate organizational credibility? As an individual benefit, is "tenure" truly tenure anymore when universities are endorsing five year reviews?

Of all the 4-H faculty I have known, those without the tenure burden seem to be the happiest and more productive, they create scholarship and more of it actually reaches the public. They are more able to relax during their vacation, not worrying about cranking out yet another article or finding another grant that they can't manage. They don't have to worry if an article is rejected after waiting almost a year to hear of its demise (sorry JOE!)

If we value tenured extension 4-H faculty, we should see they are not charged with the entire mission of the land-grant university--especially if it is not in their job description. They should be evaluated fairly. We should challenge and them and limit "other work as assigned".

Administrators need to "take the heat" once a decision has been made to drop a program and see that it doesn't fall back on the faculty shoulders. (I could write the book on this one!)Perhaps there needs to be a layer (and there may be in some states) where tenure-track 4-H faculty do not have to plan, coordinate and execute incredible numbers of programs. The trade off may be that they are able to counsel extension educators and meet critical needs as they come up. They may actually be able to publish more and they will be able to live more.

Some contend that the "gold standard" is when research and program work in harmony. I agree, but in many ways that is the problem. Research and extension can become the person's life to the detriment of that person's true self. When they don't get tenure, when they don't find a sense of fulfillment, what happens next?

There was a cartoon I remember from the Chronicle of Higher Education showing a faculty member, laden with publications approaching the bench of St. Peter. St. Peter remarks that he is not interested in all that "stuff". He doesn't care about the "titles". But he did care what we did and said that made a difference in people's lives. Something to think about!

Date: 1/22/2004

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