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Shifting the Focus of 4-H Record-Keeping from Competition and Subject Matter to Youth Development and Life Skills

Keith G. Diem

Rutgers Cooperative Extension, kdiem@rce.rutgers.edu

Annette Devitt

Rutgers Cooperative Extension, devitt@rce.rutgers.edu



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Shifting the Focus of 4-H Record-Keeping from Competition and Subject Matter to Youth Development and Life Skills

Abstract

Youth can gain a lot of valuable knowledge and skills in 4-H, especially through 4-H clubs and long-term projects. But they typically don't recognize what they learn while participating. Record-keeping can help them realize more of the value of their involvement in clubs, camps, projects, and other educational activities. And record-keeping can also help Extension staff document the impact of their 4-H programs. A new format for record-keeping developed in New Jersey incorporates key elements deemed needed in a contemporary 4-H record book, including goal setting and reporting of life skills and S.C.A.N.S. workforce competencies.

Keith G. Diem

Program Leader in Educational Design & Associate Professor
Internet Address: kdiem@rce.rutgers.edu

Annette Devitt

Salem County 4-H Agent & Associate Professor
Internet Address: devitt@rce.rutgers.edu

Rutgers Cooperative Extension
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

Why Record Books?

Youth can gain a lot of valuable knowledge and skills in 4-H, especially through 4-H clubs and long-term projects. But kids are usually so busy having fun, they don't always recognize the life skills or other competencies they learn while participating. Record-keeping can help 4-H'ers, as well as their parents and adult leaders, realize more of the value of their involvement in clubs, camps, projects, and other educational activities.

But, unfortunately, completing a 4-H record book often has become a mundane, outdated chore or something youth do at the last minute as a requirement to take part in competitive events. Despite this, there are many positive reasons for integrating record-keeping into 4-H projects throughout the year. Keeping a 4-H record book aims to help youth:

- Learn how to organize themselves;
- Learn how to set reasonable goals for themselves;
- Appreciate what they've learned each year from the goals they reached;
- Recognize what they learned in their 4-H projects;
- Explain what they've learned;
- Keep track of costs of their projects;
- Gather information needed to apply for awards and scholarships;
- Complete applications and resumes for jobs and college;
- And yes, also meet requirements to participate in some county, state, or national 4-H events.

Because of the these potential benefits, completing a record book is one of the expectations of New Jersey 4-H club members each year, along with:

- Attending at least 70% of regular club meetings and/or activities.
- Completing a 4-H project, doing one's own work with minimal assistance from parents or others.
- Giving a club or county 4-H public presentation.

Creating a Common Format with a Common Purpose

In 1998, *My 4-H Record Book--A General-Purpose Record Book* was created to be used in all 4-H projects that did not have one. The goal was to focus on youth and learning as much as on projects and contests. The result incorporated key elements 4-H staff deemed needed in a contemporary 4-H record book, including goal setting and reporting of life skills and S.C.A.N.S. workforce competencies. Also, using the same record book for multiple projects statewide aimed to minimize discrepancies at competitive events, and reduce redundant efforts and costs of developing numerous record books for unique and unusual 4-H projects offered in each county.

Other statewide record books have since been developed for larger projects common to multiple counties using this new format, including:

- Horse;
- Rabbit, Cavy, & Small Animals;
- Dog Care and Training;
- Model Horse;
- Herpetology;
- Sheep;
- Goat;
- Dairy;
- Bird and Poultry; and
- Clothing and Textiles.

To promote standardization among the variety of 4-H projects in which youth are enrolled throughout the state, all record books have a set of common features:

- Goal Setting
- 4-H Activities
- Project Finances
- Knowledge and Skills I Gained
- My 4-H Story
- Sample Project and Personal Goals

To ensure that the record books complement National 4-H Cooperative Curriculum System (4-H CCS) project books/activity guides, many of the goals listed as choices in the record books come from or are modeled after those listed in corresponding CCS curriculum materials.

The Development Process

To establish consistency and educational soundness in record books being created, a uniform curriculum development process was followed:

- A potential author (such as a county 4-H agent or state 4-H project committee) submits a proposal for development to the state 4-H Curriculum Development Board (CRB), a group consisting of the state curriculum specialist and a variety of county 4-H staff.
- A trial version is developed based on the General Purpose Record Book, with input from volunteers working in the project area.
- The trial version is approved by the CRB to be used for two 4-H years. After the first trial year, members and leaders evaluate it, based on the objectives of the record book. A Trial Version Evaluation form is included in the record books or can be completed online at <http://www.nj4h.rutgers.edu/pubs>.
- During the second trial year, evaluations are tabulated and changes are made based on the results.
- A final version is produced after the second trial year. It is available in print form at a modest fee that covers printing costs or by downloading as a PDF file, currently free of charge, at <http://www.nj4h.rutgers.edu/pubs>. Future plans include making the PDF files into writeable "forms" so youth can type their information directly into them.

What Are 4-H Members Learning?

4-H club members reported the knowledge and skills they learned or improved upon through their participation in 4-H projects during the past year by completing a checklist of items. An analysis of a sample of record books submitted by 89 youth, from five counties in 20 different projects, revealed that these youth learned the following.

Personal Skills

To set goals for myself	79%
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Knowledge of my project	79%
How to keep records of important information in my project	76%
How to organize myself	70%
What I am interested in	70%
How to get more information about something I am interested in	70%
To deal with winning and losing gracefully	67%
To try something new	66%
To understand my strengths and weaknesses	63%
How to satisfy my curiosity about a new subject	62%
How to give the 4-H Pledge	62%
How to finish something I started	61%
To keep track of finances	61%
To be proud of my accomplishments	61%
How to pay attention to instructions	60%
What is important to me	58%
To follow directions	57%
To feel good about myself	55%
To take responsibility for my own words and actions	52%

Working with Other People

How to give a public presentation	73%
To feel comfortable speaking in front of a group	72%
How to work with adults	65%
To make new friends	63%

How to solve problems	62%
How to work with the club to complete a community service project	62%
How to work with other kids	58%
How to get along with other kids	57%
To respect someone else's feelings	56%
How to lead others	53%
How to help others succeed	51%
To accept people who are different from me	51%

Other sections of the record book, such as "The 3 Most Important Things I Learned" and "Telling My Story," allow youth to express what they learned, in their own words. They can also include photos, drawings, and scrapbook items. This has provided excellent anecdotal evidence of 4-H program impact. In addition, through the trial version evaluation process, youth have indicated that record books have helped them achieve the intended purposes.

Summary: Encouraging Youth Development in Clubs and Projects

Whether creating record books or encouraging youth, leaders, and parents to use them, the philosophy of redesigned 4-H record books has been to focus on the development of the 4-H member and his or her learning experience. The primary aim is *not* for competitive purposes or to compare one member's record book to another's. De-emphasizing competitive reasons for record books may also help downplay the perceived need of some parents and leaders to complete members' record books for them.

In addition, the re-focus on youth development and life skills in these publications indicates to those using them the emphasis the 4-H program places on youth, not just subject matter. The concepts included in the record books can be integrated into working with 4-H members, parents, and leaders who are involved in any 4-H activity throughout the year.

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