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## 4-H BEST: A New Professional Development Program for 4-H County Extension Agents

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## 4-H BEST: A New Professional Development Program for 4-H County Extension Agents

### Abstract

4-H BEST (Building Essential Skills and Training) is an educational activity for 4-H professionals. The objectives are to enhance management skills in: program and volunteer development, involving and identifying new audiences, identifying and working with decision makers, resource development, and program evaluation. The uniqueness of this program is the inclusion of out-of-state professional mentors who guide the participants in this self-directed program and share ideas on innovative programming and management concepts that have made the mentors successful in their own programs.

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### Introduction

As a result of the changing demographics and needs of clients, the 4-H BEST Program has been designed to assist Extension agents in the enhancement of 4-H & Youth Development Programs. BEST is an acronym that stands for Building Essential Skills and Training. As 4-H programming becomes more diverse in Texas and throughout the nation, it is imperative that these types of professional development programs are developed to ensure that Extension agents have the necessary tools to make their programs successful. Ultimately, these successful programs will enrich the lives of youth and provide them an avenue for success.

The 4-H BEST Program was developed on the premise that there are countless outstanding 4-H Extension agents throughout the nation. Knowing this, the program coordinators match each participant with one of these accomplished 4-H Extension agents outside of Texas. These successful Extension agents are identified by their state program leaders across the country. After being identified, they are contacted by a state 4-H faculty member in Texas to see if they are interested in being a mentor agent. The 4-H Extension Agent from Texas then corresponds with this individual to share ideas and learn more about each other's program. The main areas addressed include:

- Program development,
- Volunteer development,
- Involving new audiences,
- Identifying new audiences,

- Identifying and working with decision makers,
- Resource development, and
- Program evaluation and accountability.

In addition to communicating with individuals outside of Texas, the 4-H BEST Extension agents also participate in a 2-day training taught by Texas 4-H & Youth Development State Faculty and are active in two Texas Transvisual Network (TTVN) conferences.

After the program, the Extension agents are required to write a project report detailing the education they gained throughout the professional development program. Moreover, they reveal new programming ideas and how they could implement these programs in their own county programs.

The purpose of this program is to expand learning opportunities of 4-H Extension agents in Texas. This is accomplished by providing professional development programs that were centered around group discussions and networking with Extension agents in Texas and recognized agents nationwide. Specifically, participants enhance their:

1. Team skills by being involved in a mentoring process with other agents in the class and 4-H agents identified in other states; and
2. Management skills by being involved in workshop sessions dealing with program development, volunteer development, involving new audiences, identifying new audiences, identifying and working with decision makers, resource development, and program evaluation and accountability.

### **Methods**

This opportunity is open to 4-H Youth Development Faculty in Texas. The defined prerequisite is that it is available to any 4-H Extension Agent with less than 10 years of experience who displays a strong interest in a career in 4-H & Youth Development. The selection committee accepts approximately 20 4-H Extension agents to participate in the program yearly. These individuals are selected based on their application and curriculum vitae.

These individuals meet at a central location where they spend 2 days discussing and sharing ideas about programs in their specific counties. Moreover, the participants are provided the objectives of the course. These include:

- Building knowledge of program development,
- Volunteer development,
- Involving new audiences,
- Identifying new audiences,
- Identifying and working with decision makers,
- Resource development, and
- Program evaluation and accountability.

After the 2-day meeting, the participants return to their respective counties and contact their out-of-state mentor to learn more about their program. During this time period, two TTVN trainings are conducted to allow the program coordinator the opportunity to measure the growth taking place during the meetings with the out of state mentor. Moreover, these trainings further develop the specific objectives that are being built with the participants. At the conclusion of the final TTVN, each participant is required to write a project summary that details their growth based on the objectives. In addition, they discuss their relationship with their out-of-state mentor and the ideas they gained through the experience.

Before the program starts and at its conclusion, a pre-test survey and post-test survey are administered to each participant. A five-point Likert-type scale is used to determine the knowledge levels of each participant on program development, volunteer development, involving new audiences, identifying new audiences, identifying and working with decision makers, resource development, and program evaluation and accountability. The five-point Likert-type scale is as follows: 1=Extremely Low, 2=Low, 3=Moderate, 4=High, 5=Extremely High.

In addition, an open-ended section has been developed for the post-test that asks if the program met the participants' preconceived anticipated goals and objectives with the 4-H BEST Program. These two documents were developed by three Texas 4-H & Youth Development Faculty Members. These members include the program coordinator (Professor and Extension 4-H and Youth Development Specialist), another Professor and Extension 4-H and Youth Development Specialist, and the Assistant Director for 4-H and Youth. These instruments were then validated by two Extension Evaluation Specialists for content and clarity before administering.

### **Conclusions**

With societal changes, effective professional development programming must change with the clientele. The 4-H BEST Program opens the door to this philosophy. It is well understood that there are tremendously effective and accomplished Extension agents throughout the country. This

program is unique because it establishes a network among Extension agents nationwide. In today's global network, state boundaries should not limit communication among effective Extension agents. This program's agenda opens the doors for collaborations, innovations, and idea sharing for Extension professionals.

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