Adult Volunteer Development: Addressing the Effectiveness of Training New 4-H Leaders

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Abstract
4-H traditionally focuses on positive youth development, but adult volunteers are the mainstay of the programs. We evaluated the effectiveness of 4-H new leader education and its influence on the skill development of adult volunteer leaders. Using a retrospective pretest method, we found that participants in 4-H new leader training increased their knowledge and readiness to be 4-H leaders. Skills gained from new leader education were also being applied outside of the 4-H context. Planning and carrying out yearly club programs was identified as an area in which current training could be improved.

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Introduction

The motivation and retention of volunteers are increasingly important to organizations that depend on adult volunteers (Van Horn, Flanagan, & Thomson, 1999). Effective training programs enable volunteer leaders to develop sets of skills, receive rewards, and experience social affiliation. These are all key motivators for adult volunteer leader participation and retention (Hall, 1995; Rouse & Clawson, 1992).

4-H youth development programs within Extension depend heavily on adult volunteers and provide extensive training to volunteer leaders. 4-H traditionally focuses on positive youth development,

but adult volunteers are the mainstay of the programs. A study of Ohio 4-H agents revealed that they believed orienting volunteers is important but lack information on whether their training programs or teaching strategies are effective (Deppe & Culp, 2001). Non-systematic training and the lack of volunteer recognition are two problems identified as crucial to the management of Extension volunteers (Navaratnam, 1986). Although the training received by Extension volunteers has been rated as "quality" when compared to other organizations (Braker, Leno, Pratt, & Grobe, 2000), the need to strengthen the design and implementation of 4-H training programs is ongoing.

Some studies have shown that adult volunteer leaders appreciate and recognize their need for effective training programs (Cook, Kiernan, & Ott, 1986) and value the opportunity to develop skills and knowledge relevant both within and outside the context of 4-H (Van Horn, Flanagan, & Thomson, 1999). Specific evaluations of new leader training enable 4-H staff to assess the knowledge and skill base of new volunteers and measure particular training outcomes.

Effective leadership training can be an important mechanism for strengthening 4-H organizations (Van Horn, Flanagan, & Thomson, 1999). Evaluation of training programs can influence future outcomes and activities as well as aid in program accountability by determining if leadership development among adult volunteers makes a difference to individual leaders, the organization, and surrounding communities (Michael, 1990; Rossi & Freeman, 1993).

A pilot evaluation study was developed to examine the effect of training on the adult volunteers engaged in 4-H new leader education. Strengthening future training programs and establishing statewide evaluation standards were part of the rationale for the pilot study. The purpose of the project was to examine the effectiveness of 4-H new leader education and its influence on the skill development of adult volunteer leaders. The objectives were to evaluate 4-H volunteer leader readiness, and assess whether adult volunteers would utilize the knowledge and skills gained in training sessions, both within and outside of the 4-H context. It is important to measure how well adult volunteers are prepared and what impact the volunteer leader experience may have on the lives of 4-H adult volunteer leaders.

Methodology

All potential volunteers are required to complete 4-H new leader education as part of the application and screening process. In order to measure the outcomes of new leader training, seven 4-H field faculty members from seven rural counties in Oregon were recruited. The counties in the sample contain towns ranging in population size from 2,000 to 50,000. The 4-H clubs in these counties primarily serve white and Latino youth. During the 1999-2000 program year, the numbers of 4-H leaders in the sample counties ranged from 68 to 357. In general, the volunteer base of the Oregon 4-H program is predominately female and white.

Each county in the study held training sessions for adult 4-H volunteers. The content of these new leader education sessions was uniform, although different trainers delivered the materials. Training session content contained these modules:

- Orientation to 4-H and the Oregon State University Extension Service;
- Enrollment of children in a 4-H club;
- Club meetings and year long club program planning and coordination; and
- Use of age appropriate activities to teach 4-H participants.

Depending on the county, length of training varied from 2 to 6 hours and incorporated a variety of teaching techniques such as lecture, discussion, video presentations, and group activities. The numbers of new leaders trained ranged from 2 to 30 participants in a training session.

Two questionnaires were developed to evaluate adult volunteer leadership during the 1999-2000 4-H year beginning October 1 and ending September 30. The initial questionnaire was designed to measure three critical training areas in the 4-H Staff Handbook on Volunteer Development:

- Teaching techniques,
- Club management, and
- Age-appropriate activities.

The questionnaire used two retrospective pretest questions and quantitative rating scales. The questionnaire was distributed immediately following the new leader education sessions between October 1, 1999 and May 15, 2000. A total of 228 volunteers completed the training sessions. Two hundred eight volunteers completed and returned questionnaires, resulting in a response rate of 91%. The initial questionnaire was administered directly following the new leader training, so the response rate was very high.

The follow-up questionnaire was designed to assess adult volunteer leaders' perceptions of their progress towards:

- Utilizing active teaching techniques,
- Managing club programs, and
- Implementing age-appropriate activities.

Two other important questions were:

- Did adult volunteer leaders feel that new leader education and their experiences as new leaders contributed to personal growth?
- Did adult volunteer leaders use the skills learned in new leader training within and/or outside of the 4-H environment?

An average of 6 to 9 months after completing the new leader education training, volunteers from the seven sampled counties who enrolled as new 4-H leaders during the 1999-2000 4-H year were sent follow-up questionnaires. Each county was responsible for designing and disseminating packets that included cover letters, questionnaires, and return envelopes. Of the original 208 volunteers who were trained, 20 volunteers did not enroll as new 4-H leaders. Questionnaires were mailed to 188 respondents between October and December 2000.

A total of 74 volunteer leaders completed and mailed in the follow-up questionnaires, resulting in a response rate of 39%. The response rate for the mailed follow-up questionnaire was low, partially due to the method itself. Another factor was that the degree of follow-up varied between counties. Four counties sent follow-up postcards, one county did follow-up telephone calls, and two counties did not do any follow-up activities.

The county field staff were responsible for collecting the completed questionnaires and entering their results in an EXCEL table, according to instructions from the authors. These results were compiled and analyzed centrally using the Statistical Program for Social Sciences (SPSS). Each county received a summary of county and statewide results.

Results

The results of the initial questionnaire indicated that volunteers increased their knowledge and developed skills as a result of new leader training. Using a retrospective pretest method, 4-H new leader training participants were asked to rate their knowledge and readiness to become a 4-H leader before and after the session (Table 1). In the retrospective pretest method, respondents were asked to report on their current knowledge and where they perceived themselves to have been before the training. The retrospective pretest method was appropriate in this circumstance because of the possibility that some new volunteer leaders would overestimate their capability as a leader before the training (Pratt, McGuigan, & Katzev, 2000).

Table 1.
Retrospective Pretest Mean Ratings and Standard Deviations on New Leader
Initial Questionnaire

Question	M	SD	Significance
4-H Knowledge Before Class	3.12	1.08	.000
4-H Knowledge After Class	4.37	.59	.000
Preparedness to be 4-H Leader Before Class	2.77	1.06	.000
Preparedness to be 4-H Leader After Class	4.21	.65	.000
Note: n = 208. Scale from 1-5, 1 = "low" and 5 = "high."			

Participants also reported that training sessions increased their knowledge in a number of areas and aided in their preparation for leadership responsibilities (Table 2). Participant responses indicated that training sessions increased their understanding of 4-H organizational structures in counties (mean = 4.20) and 4-H's relationship with county and University Extension (mean = 4.07). Participants also said that training sessions prepared them for leadership responsibilities, particularly club start-up activities, including project books for leaders and members (mean = 4.26) and youth and self-enrollment in 4-H clubs (mean = 4.20). Ninety-eight percent of participants rated it likely or very likely that they would apply what they learned in 4-H new leader training. Almost all participants (99%) rated the teaching as "above average" or "excellent."

Table 2.
Mean Ratings and Standard Deviations on New Leader Initial Questionnaire

Question	M	SD
Increased awareness/knowledge		
Relationship of 4-H to county Extension and university	4.07	1.08

	Mean	SD
Planning and conducting club meeting	3.96	.97
Planning yearly program	3.87	.91
Matching activities to age of 4-H members	3.87	1.05
Techniques for teaching 4-H members	3.88	.96
Organizational structure of county 4-H program	4.20	.86
Preparation for 4-H leader responsibilities		
Enroll self and youth in 4-H club	4.20	.86
Obtain 4-H project books for leaders and members	4.26	.89
Plan yearly 4-H programs	3.97	.89
Note: n = 208. Scale from 1-5, 1 = "not at all" and 5 = "a great deal."		

Follow-up questionnaires were completed by 74 new 4-H volunteer leaders. (89% were club leaders, and 11% were resource leaders who specialized in offering specific projects or activities to leaders and club members.) Their responses indicated that certain teaching techniques, club management responsibilities, and age-appropriate activities were utilized more often than others (see Table 3).

Table 3.
Responses to 4-H New Leader Follow-up Questionnaire

Question	Percentages (Frequency)					
	Do		Don't		Have Not Used Yet	
Teaching techniques						
Plan and conduct 4-H education activities using "learn by doing" philosophy	78%	(56)	1%	(1)	21%	(15)
Use variety of teaching approaches	76%	(55)	3%	(2)	21%	(15)
Plan and use variety of teaching tools	51%	(37)	7%	(5)	42%	(30)
Club management						
Ensure members have role in club meetings	57%	(41)	12%	(9)	31%	(22)
Plan club meeting ahead of time	70%	(50)	8%	(6)	22%	(16)

Plan yearly club program	49%	(36)	7%	(5)	44%	(32)
Age-appropriate activities						
Encourage older 4-H members to explore leadership roles	59%	(42)	9%	(6)	32%	(23)
Plan additional time to support younger members	63%	(45)	10%	(7)	27%	(19)
Adjust activity if not working for group	70%	(51)	3%	(2)	27%	(19)
Allow enough time for members to plan and carry out activities	80%	(56)	6%	(4)	14%	(10)
Note: $n = 74$.						

As a result of 4-H new leader education, participants reported that they have planned and conducted 4-H educational activities using the "learn by doing" philosophy (78%) and use a variety of teaching techniques (76%). Regarding club management responsibilities, they are more likely to have planned club meetings ahead of time (70%) and less likely to have planned a yearly program (49%). Participants also indicated that they have allowed enough time for members to plan and carry out activities (80%) and adjust activities if not working for the group (70%).

Other data from this questionnaire revealed that 83% of respondents indicated that involvement as a 4-H leader helped contribute to their personal growth. They gained teaching skills (53%), organizational or planning skills (46%), and leadership and/or cooperation skills (36%). Participants also indicated that they have applied new or improved skills in other arenas such as school (33%) or family (29%) settings.

Discussion

Results of the initial questionnaire showed that 4-H new leader education increased the knowledge and preparedness of volunteers to be 4-H leaders. Furthermore, volunteer leaders are likely to utilize the information gained during the training. We also found that while the mean ratings of knowledge and preparedness to be a 4-H leader increased as a result of training, the standard deviations went down. For "increased knowledge," the standard deviation dropped from 1.08 to .59, and for "increased preparedness," the standard deviation dropped from 1.06 to .65.

One might expect the standard deviation to be high for "before class" responses because participants come to 4-H new leader education with a wide variety of experience with 4-H. Some participants have been 4-H members themselves or are parents of 4-H members, and others come to the class with no experience at all. The fact that the mean increased while the standard deviation went down shows that the session is bringing everyone closer to the same knowledge and preparedness level.

In the identified training area, "plan a yearly club program," training did not lead to the expected outcome that 4-H leaders would set yearly goals and carry out pre-planned activities with 4-H members. This was apparent in the results of both the initial and follow-up questionnaires. Although the mean rating of knowledge gained to plan a club program was 3.87 and preparedness to plan a club program was 3.97, only 49% of club leaders indicated that they "plan a yearly club program" on the follow-up questionnaire. These results suggest the need to develop educational materials and leader support to help volunteer leaders meet this goal.

More information is needed to determine whether participants are meeting other 4-H goals. The follow-up questionnaire results indicate that new leaders understand the goal expectations but may not have had enough time or the opportunity to meet the behaviors for each goal. For instance, one participant commented that she had only been a leader for a short time, "but there are a lot of things that we learned at new leader education that we are hoping to bring to our club." In some cases, new leaders reported that they did not have the opportunity to pursue activities in selected goal areas. They also indicated that they:

- Had not planned and used a variety of teaching tools with 4-H youth (42%);
- Had not planned a yearly club program (44%); and
- Had not encouraged older 4-H members to explore leadership roles (32%).

In addition, the follow-up questionnaire results showed that skills gained from new leader education were also being applied outside of the 4-H environment in family and school settings.

These skills included planning/organizing (46%), teaching (53%), and leadership and teamwork/cooperation (36%). Seventy-eight percent of respondents were applying their new skills in non 4-H roles. Finally, 83% of new leaders on the follow-up questionnaire reported that 4-H new leader education and being a 4-H leader had contributed to their personal growth. While the results of our study were positive, further evaluation and research are needed in this area.

Readers should use caution in interpreting the findings from this study. This project would have been strengthened by:

- Inclusion of urban as well as rural counties. The sampled counties represented rural and small town areas typical of 4-H in Oregon.
- Random selection of counties and instructors.
- More attention to the demographics of adult volunteer leaders.
- More consistent follow-up from all counties.
- Same format in both the initial and follow-up questionnaires. (The three central objectives of the training were covered.)
- Greater similarity in the training experience. Differences included numbers of new leaders to be trained and numbers of hours of instruction.

A longitudinal design that followed the same leaders over time would have been ideal for this project. It would be instructive to interview the volunteer leaders who drop out to discover their motivations for doing so. Despite these limitations, the purpose of this pilot project was to determine whether the new leader training was accomplishing the objectives envisioned by the instructors. The results will be very useful in improving the program and moving to statewide collection of evaluation data.

Conclusion

4-H new leader education benefits adults preparing to serve as 4-H leaders. Adult volunteers find these sessions to be relevant, increasing their knowledge and preparedness for their volunteer roles. Highlighting our results may help promote the benefits of volunteering to potential leaders and other stakeholders.

Our results also indicate some areas where we can continue to strengthen the link between new leader training and volunteer effectiveness. First, it is critical to provide more support to 4-H leaders in the area of planning and carrying out yearly club programs. Second, a continued focus on the effect of 4-H new leader education on adult volunteer personal development is also warranted. Finally, efforts to develop evaluation instruments for existing leaders should be expanded in order to gauge their progress towards 4-H new leader education goals.

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