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Impact of COVID-19 on Missouri 4-H State Fair Participation and Implications for Youth Development Programs

Abstract

For University of Missouri Extension, facilitation of Missouri 4-H's participation in the Missouri State Fair (MSF) during the COVID-19 era was a challenge and an opportunity for improvement. In a time when positive youth development experiences are more necessary than ever, Extension professionals must consider how to uphold the foundations of positive youth development and maintain a sense of program normalcy while ensuring new levels of safety and security. We describe lessons learned before, during, and after Missouri 4-H made the decision to open the MSF 4-H building in the midst of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic and issue a call for related action by others.

Keywords: [state fairs](#), [4-H exhibitors](#), [COVID-19](#)

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Introduction

Fairs are a tradition for the 4-H program, including in Missouri, where agriculture is an \$88 billion industry (Missouri Department of Agriculture, n.d.) and the majority of 4-H members' projects relate to agriculture and livestock. Fairs are mastery events showcasing what members have learned (Puckett, 2018) and are the culmination of the process of learning, creating, and discovering through 4-H experiences leading to developmental outcomes in youths (Agans et al., 2014; Turner, 2018). Missouri 4-H has been active at the Missouri State Fair (MSF) since 1918 (Missouri State Fair, n.d.), with the fair having been canceled only during World War II (Willis, 2020). The MSF is the premier showcase event for the Missouri 4-H program, a family event, and a source of revenue for many families. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the potential of having the 2020 MSF was in jeopardy.

In March 2020, while University of Missouri (MU) Extension canceled all face-to-face programming and confronted system-wide budget cuts, 4-H members continued preparing their exhibits and went through a strict county selection process to be able to show at the state fair. During the first 3 months of the pandemic, upcoming MSF fairground events as well as 4-H camps, trainings, services, events, and club activities were canceled. MU Extension professionals understood, however, that in difficult times, young people need positive

youth development opportunities more than ever to help ensure the success of their generation (Arnold, 2020). We describe the struggle and challenges MU Extension professionals, including the 4-H team, went through to be present at the 2020 MSF and the capability of MU Extension professionals to adapt to new circumstances and thrive. As the pandemic continues, Extension professionals are benefiting from reports of one another's experiences; herein, we contribute to that body of work.

Missouri 4-H and the 2020 State Fair: Evolving Circumstances

The MSF is organized by superintendents for each of the livestock species and buildings. Missouri 4-H is responsible for naming two superintendents—one for overall livestock exhibits and one for all other exhibits housed in the 4-H building. Maria Calvert is one of the superintendents for the 4-H building.

The Missouri 4-H team started planning the 2020 MSF in November 2019 as fair planning takes at least 10 months. In March 2020, when the country began experiencing closures due to the pandemic, comments arose regarding cancelation of county and state fairs. A couple of weeks later, MSF announced the closing of the fairgrounds and cancellation of events through May 10. During April and May, fair superintendents and commissioners continued to plan and prepare for the state fair, which was scheduled to occur in August. During those months, amid rumors about sponsor, vendor, and concert cancellations, Missouri Governor Mike Parson announced that a final decision about the 2020 MSF would be made in June. On June 18, Governor Parson announced that the MSF would go on, with the exclusion of concerts: The carnival would occur, vendors would be present, and buildings would be open. This news initiated discussions in MU Extension around whether 4-H could safely participate at the fair and, especially, whether to open the 4-H building. By the end of June, seven midwestern states (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Minnesota, North Dakota, Ohio, Wisconsin) had canceled their state fairs, and Nebraska had announced that its would focus only on 4-H and FFA exhibits (Neades, 2020).

By that time, many Missouri county fairs also had been canceled. On July 17, it was announced that the MSF carnival would not occur, vendors would not be present, and open-show buildings would be closed; however, Governor Parson stated that Missouri would stay true to its agriculture roots and host the MSF for youth exhibitors (Office of the Governor of Missouri, 2020). Missouri 4-H then consulted with FFA, and the groups made the decision to support the MSF by opening the 4-H and FFA buildings in addition to supporting the livestock shows. The 4-H building superintendents continued to plan, with support from the MSF director, and sought reapproval from MU Extension leadership to open the 4-H building.

The Challenge of COVID-19

At multiple points during the time period described above, MU Extension, especially Missouri 4-H, questioned the risk and reward of having a presence at the MSF. Youth participation in fairs has a significant positive effect on participants' levels of caring, contribution, and character and is a catalyst for developmental outcomes in youths (Arnold et al., 2007). For the majority of Missouri 4-H youths, fairs are the highlight of their summer (Sharpe & Santl, 2020), a circumstance that reflects the urgent need to pivot 4-H programs to work in this new reality in order to keep vital programming momentum and participation moving forward (Arnold & Rennekamp, 2020). In our roles, we in particular understood how vital fairs are to 4-H youths, but we also had the responsibility of keeping exhibitors and visitors safe. The challenge was to review the COVID-19 recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and determine whether we

could do so.

After the decision was made to open the 4-H building, safety became the number one priority for 4-H professionals, families, and supporters. Plans around every aspect of participating in the MSF changed regularly as the situation developed. It was critical to have the ability to adapt and to remain vigilant of updates in COVID-19 policies and procedures coming from MU, the MSF, local government, and the State of Missouri.

Strategic partnerships allowed MU Extension to maintain an appropriate level of preparedness and safety. Before the MSF, Missouri 4-H created a partnership with MU Sinclair School of Nursing senior community health students to host a social media campaign to remind families to maintain healthful habits. The 4-H building was professionally cleaned and disinfected following CDC guidelines. The exhibit drop-off and pick-up times were extended to give those with exhibits more time and space in which to work. Faculty, staff, and volunteers were encouraged to check in and out their own items in order to achieve social distancing.

During the fair, the building was equipped with masks, hand sanitizer, and signs to direct the traffic. Everyone who entered the building was required to wear a mask and maintain a distance from others of 6 ft. The building hours were limited, and office and private areas were restricted to only fair staff. All high-contact activities (in-person demonstrations, hands-on activities, and the 4-H Building Ambassador program) were canceled. Missouri 4-H used technology as an optional way for youths to submit their qualifying demonstrations via a recorded video. These virtual demonstrations were shared on social media and on televisions around the building.

When the fair ended, all employees who assisted at the fair were instructed to work from home for 2 weeks. No cases of COVID-19 were reported among employees or visitors to the 4-H building.

Lessons Learned

Through our facilitation of 4-H involvement in the MSF during a pandemic, we gained several lessons learned:

- MU Extension 4-H professionals' main challenge was navigating emerging policies and changing guidelines surrounding COVID-19 from MU, MU Extension, and the MSF.
- The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the reality that MU Extension 4-H professionals needed to strengthen their innovation, flexibility, and adaptability to provide services during emergencies.
- MU Extension 4-H professionals were equipped and prepared to make informed and research-based decisions and swiftly share those with the public during stressful situations.
- MU Extension 4-H professionals, parents, volunteers, and youths were required to follow policies and guidelines, as the situation was not open to negotiation.
- Due to the unique challenges of the situation, maintaining intrinsic and extrinsic motivation among 4-H team members was critical.
- Communication was a key element while dealing with stressful situations. It was necessary to send strong and consistent messages through multiple outlets.

- It is possible to offer positive youth development opportunities in a secure way during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Implications

Missouri 4-H, as part of MU Extension, led, adapted, innovated, and provided alternative solutions to emerging issues while participating at the 2020 MSF during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through our efforts, we confirmed that 4-H continues to evolve and adapt programming to reach the changing needs of youths (Arnold & Rennekamp, 2020). The goal is to offer positive youth development opportunities to ensure the success of the next generation. Even through uncertain times, with proper research and planning, comprehensive experiences can still be offered to youths. We are asking 4-H professionals to be inspired by the unique circumstances facing us now to lead, adapt, innovate, and find solutions to current and future challenges facing youths and to provide them with the positive youth development they need. Contemplate how a sense of program normalcy can be maintained, but with new levels of safety and security. It is crucial for youth development professionals to be cognizant of the needs of those we serve and offer solutions that result in positive impact.

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