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Online Orientation for 4-H Volunteers

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Abstract

The 4-H Online Volunteer Orientation Series provides an opportunity for volunteers to receive orientation at times and places that are convenient for them. Online orientation provides a means for efficiently orienting a large cadre of volunteers. Twenty voice-over PowerPoint presentations were created in three series: 4-H Camp (seven presentations), Volunteer Certifications (three presentations), and 4-H Clubs (10 presentations). Each presentation concludes with a five-question quiz designed to assess knowledge gained. Volunteers scoring 80% or higher receive credit. Volunteers who have completed orientation better understand and fulfill their roles, serve more effectively, and have a greater likelihood of continuing their service.

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Introduction and Review of Literature

Volunteers are an essential component of 4-H youth development programming in the United States. More than 611,800 volunteers deliver 4-H youth development programs to U.S. youths annually (National 4-H Council, n.d.) Yet people often face barriers that discourage them from volunteering (Ouellette, Lesmeister, Lobley, & Gross, 2014). These barriers include lack of information, skills, and educational opportunities (Points of Light Foundation, 2000). To maximize volunteer contributions and involvement, Extension 4-H professionals must recognize that volunteers perform at a higher level when given tasks they understand and are able to do (Hoover & Conner, 2001; Wilson, 1976). Simply put, volunteer orientation and education are necessary to prepare volunteers for their roles (Ouellette et al., 2014).

4-H volunteers recognize the importance of orientation, professional development, and continuing education. They have indicated that lack of training/educational opportunities is a primary cause for disengaging from volunteer service (Culp, 1996). Indeed, 4-H programs often lack structured volunteer development components (Deppe & Culp, 2001). Designing continuing education programs can be a challenging task for Extension professionals (Moravec, 2006).

Even when educational opportunities exist, motivating volunteers to take advantage of them also can be

challenging (Culp, 1996). In general, to expand volunteer involvement, innovative methods of orienting and educating volunteers need to be identified and used. For example, technology provides a flexible means of orienting new volunteers and educating continuing volunteers. Online instruction is a useful tool, providing a medium and a method for delivering time-sensitive, relevant, and consistent information, regardless of learners' locations and schedules (Kaslon, Lodl, & Greve, 2005). Research has shown that 4-H volunteers accept online education as a method for gaining new skills (Cook, Kiernan, & Ott, 1986; Kaslon et al., 2005; Sherfey, Hiller, MacDuff, & Mack, 2000). They are willing to explore learning via distance education and report that they are already using the web to find their own resources for 4-H (Kaslon et al., 2005).

Specifically, web-based learning options for 4-H volunteers offer advantages and flexibility in scheduling not found with traditional face-to-face instruction. Boettcher and Conrad (1999) and Kaslon et al. (2005) reported that 4-H volunteers felt it was easier and more useful to download web-based information than to visit an Extension office during business hours. Additionally, Ouellette et al. (2014) sampled 4-H volunteers in 19 states and found that online instruction was an effective delivery format for introducing information to new volunteer leaders, who appreciated the flexibility and accessibility of the virtual training modules. Another advantage of online instruction modules is that consistent information can be presented to all new and current volunteers on globally important topics, including youth development, teaching and learning, parliamentary procedure, and so forth (Ouellette et al., 2014). Furthermore, online instruction modules could be developed to align with the Volunteer Research Knowledge Competency taxonomy (Culp, McKee, & Nestor, 2006). Online instruction for 4-H volunteers may be best used as an introduction to 4-H that is followed by face-to-face education focused on county- or state-specific information.

Creating the 4-H Online Volunteer Orientation Series

The 4-H Online Volunteer Orientation Series was created in recognition of the need to reach busy volunteers without burdening agents with a multitude of individual orientations. This series of online presentations allows a 4-H volunteer to participate in the required education at a time and place that is convenient for the volunteer. Volunteers may watch the online presentations alone at their homes or offices or in group settings at Extension offices. This medium adds to the Extension toolbelt another tool for efficiently and effectively orienting a larger cadre of volunteers.

Using materials and information available in Kentucky, 20 voice-over PowerPoint presentations, organized in three series, were created. The seven presentations in the 4-H Camp series are as follows: The History of Kentucky's 4-H Camping Program; Introduction, Benefits of Camping, and Camping Objectives; County Camp Program, 4-H Camp Age Policy, and Multi District Camp Committee; Vision Statement and Youth Development Through 4-H Camping; ACA (American Camp Association); Camp Planning; and Operations and Policies. The three presentations in the Volunteer Certifications series were developed to orient volunteers in each of the three certification projects: Livestock, Horse, and Shooting Sports. Additionally, a nominal group process was used to identify 10 topics that would provide an inclusive overview for 4-H club leaders. The 10 presentations in the 4-H Clubs series are as follows: What is 4-H?, 4-H Delivery Methods, 4-H Volunteer Roles, 4-H Club Meetings, Parents Involvement and Responsibilities, Characteristics of Youth, Teaching and Learning Styles, Behavioral Expectations and Handling Conflict, Recognizing and Reporting Child Abuse, and Planning an Annual 4-H Calendar.

Each presentation ends with a five-question quiz designed to assess knowledge gained. A participant must obtain a score of at least 80% correct on the quiz to receive credit for a particular orientation module. After successfully completing the quiz, the volunteer prints a certificate and presents it to his or her agent. The agent places the

certificate in the volunteer's personnel file to document completion of the orientation module.

4-H volunteer orientation has been a requirement for new volunteers in Kentucky since 2001. However, the reality is that with the exception of providing orientation for 4-H Camp volunteers, most agents are not providing orientation to many volunteers. The 4-H Online Volunteer Orientation Series gives agents an opportunity to provide orientation quickly, easily, and without the challenges involved in scheduling and preparing a program.

It is anticipated that the 4-H Online Volunteer Orientation Series will corroborate the findings of Fox, Herbert, Martin, and Bairnsfather (2009). This team of researchers found that volunteers who have undergone orientation understand their roles in an organization, more effectively fulfill their roles, and have a greater likelihood of continuing their service to the organization another year. Online learning provides a way for 4-H agents to effectively orient volunteers while eliminating most, if not all, of the barriers that discourage volunteer service.

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