The 4-H Club Meeting: An Essential Youth Development Strategy

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Abstract

The club meeting has served as a key delivery method for 4-H programming across the United States throughout its history. A survey of WV 4-H community club members reinforces the body of evidence that the 4-H club meeting is an effective vehicle for delivering positive youth learning opportunities within the umbrella of the Essential Elements of 4-H youth development programming. This article discusses the findings of the West Virginia study and addresses the delivery of effective 4-H club programming that incorporates the Essential Elements.

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Introduction

4-H has become the nation's largest youth development program and one of the largest in the world. 4-H provides meaningful opportunities for young people to reach their full potential through experiential learning and engagement strategies. It is well established that participation in 4-H has the potential to improve outcomes for young people and build assets in key areas identified through Search Institute research (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006).

The Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs <http://www.findyouthinfo.gov/about-us> (2008), a collaboration of 12 federal departments and agencies that support youth, created a definition of positive youth development:

> Positive youth development is an intentional, pro-social approach that engages youth within their communities, schools, organizations, peer groups, and families in a manner that is productive and constructive; recognizes, utilizes, and enhances youths' strengths; and promotes positive outcomes for young people by providing opportunities, fostering positive relationships, and furnishing the support needed to build on their leadership strengths.

A study conducted by the Institute for Applied Research in Youth Development, Tufts University (Lerner, Lerner, & Phelps, 2008) found that 4-H community club membership provides youths with the opportunity for much greater participation in structured, quality programming than participation in single 4-H events alone. Other studies indicate that positive youth development is best delivered though experiences that help young people develop competencies in social, ethical, emotional, physical, and cognitive domains (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Delgado (2002) emphasizes, "The true meaning of youth development can be achieved only through partnerships, particularly those that have youth play increasingly critical and decision-making roles." Community 4-H clubs have the potential to offer this level of high-quality programming to their members, providing short- and long-term benefits as well as encouraging meeting attendance and membership retention.

Today, young people have more opportunities for participation in "extra-curricular" activities at school, in sports, at church, and other youth development organizations than ever before. These additional opportunities often mean that

youths and families must prioritize the activities in which they participate and determine how best to invest their time and resources. It is clear that community 4-H club meetings must offer true, valuable experiences for members in order for 4-H to retain its position as vital and meaningful in the lives of young people.

4-H Club Meetings and the Essential Elements of 4-H Youth Development

West Virginia 4-H provides structured youth development programming for young people through three primary service delivery modes: club meetings, hands-on self selected project work, and county and state camps. Each county is responsible for the development of programs to meet the needs and interests of the membership. Community 4-H clubs serve as a significant source for the delivery of 4-H programming to a majority of West Virginia members. Community clubs typically meet on a monthly basis and have been a primary method of service delivery to youths and families since the inception of 4-H.

A 1985 study conducted by Kirk Astroth found that 20% of new 4-H members left, dropped out, or did not re-enroll during the second year. It was found that the following were major factors in leaving 4-H: 1) lack of an understanding of 4-H programs, 2) never felt welcomed or part of the group, 3) conflicting time commitments, 4) project groups did not meet often enough or frequently enough to satisfy the children, or 5) they moved away. Likewise, Ritchie and Resler (1993) found the primary reason for dropping out was displeasure with the 4-H club activity. Additional study in 1993 (Norland & Bennett) found that members choose to participate, and some, unfortunately, choose to drop out.

Following years of research, a national 4-H team of youth development experts identified the Eight Essential Elements of 4-H, which have been distilled into four overarching components. These components are critically important to positive youth development. Although 4-H programming may vary from state to state or county to county, the Essential Elements drive 4-H to provide the highest level of programs and services possible. These elements include: Mastery, Independence, Belonging, and Generosity. Bledsoe et al. (2008) argue that:

> It is the combination of the elements that creates a positive environment for youth development. By intentionally including these elements, youth can participate experientially in activities and events, feel nurtured in a safe environment, master new skills and abilities, and be empowered to contribute to their environment and communities in a positive way.

Research, including that reported by Grégoire (2004), indicates that the Essential Elements of 4-H youth development are successfully being delivered to members through 4-H club programming. A West Virginia University Extension faculty team studied the effectiveness of 4-H club meetings in the delivery of the Essential Elements, as related to member experiences. This article reviews the findings of the West Virginia study and shares what can be done to help ensure the effective delivery of the Essential Elements through 4-H club programs.

4-H Club Member Survey About WV 4-H Club Meetings

Club meetings have been a primary method of service delivery for young people and their families since the inception of 4-H. In West Virginia, community 4-H clubs typically meet on a monthly basis. In 2010, a survey was mailed to 4-H members in three diverse counties in order to increase understanding about the relationship between 4-H club meetings and the Essential Elements of 4-H Youth Development programs. This survey was designed to determine the variables that influence 4-H members' decisions to attend and participate in club meetings and to gauge their level of satisfaction with club meetings as related to the delivery of these Essential Elements.

Methods

The purposeful study was descriptive and correlational in nature and was conducted using a mail-in questionnaire as outlined by Dillman (1978) to gather responses from 4-H community club members. The sample size was representative of three (3) diverse and distinct West Virginia counties: Brooke, Fayette, and Lewis. The research team prepared the necessary documents, which were reviewed by a panel of experts that included WVU Extension 4-H faculty members and the WVU Extension evaluation specialist. Subsequently, requests to conduct the study and the project were approved by the WVU Institutional Review Board.

The respondents received a cover letter that was signed by the county 4-H agent to increase immediate comfort of the recipients and their parents. The letter explained the goals of the study, the confidential and anonymous nature of response information, and the voluntary nature of participation. Participants also received consent and assent forms (developed in conjunction with the West Virginia University Institutional Review Board) along with one self- addressed stamped envelope to return the completed survey for tabulation. Youth also received a pen to help encourage participation. A reminder notice was mailed 3 weeks following the initial mailing of the survey to all the 4-H members asking them to respond if they lost the previous mailing or did not reply previously. Completed responses were sent to the West Virginia University Extension Service evaluation specialist for compilation of the data. The data was analyzed using SPSS. Survey responses were anonymous and confidential and did not jeopardize the members' ability to continue as a 4-H member. (Limitations of the survey: the instrument, was reviewed but not piloted and, due to geographic limitations, cannot be generalized.)

Instruments

A self-reporting, pencil paper, mail-in questionnaire designed by the research team asked a series of 21 questions. The survey asked respondents to identify demographic information, which included: gender, age range, length of 4-H membership (range), involvement in community activities, and their perceptions about club meetings. The 4-H Club Meeting Survey included multiple choice, a 4-point Likert Scale, and yes/no and open-ended questions.

Findings

Three hundred sixty-eight surveys were sent to community club 4-H members in Lewis, Brooke, and Fayette counties. Ninety-one (24.7%) completed surveys were received. The majority of survey respondents were girls (65%.) Of those 4-H members participating in the survey, 40% were ages 11-13, 32% were ages 14 – 18, 26% were ages 10 or younger, and 2% were ages 19-20. Most of the members providing responses (33.6%) were enrolled in club membership for 2-3 years. And, 52% of survey participants were enrolled in clubs that had 11 – 20 members.

Figures 1, 2, and 3 highlight respondent demographics. Figure 4 illustrates club sizes as reported by respondents.

Figures 1-4.
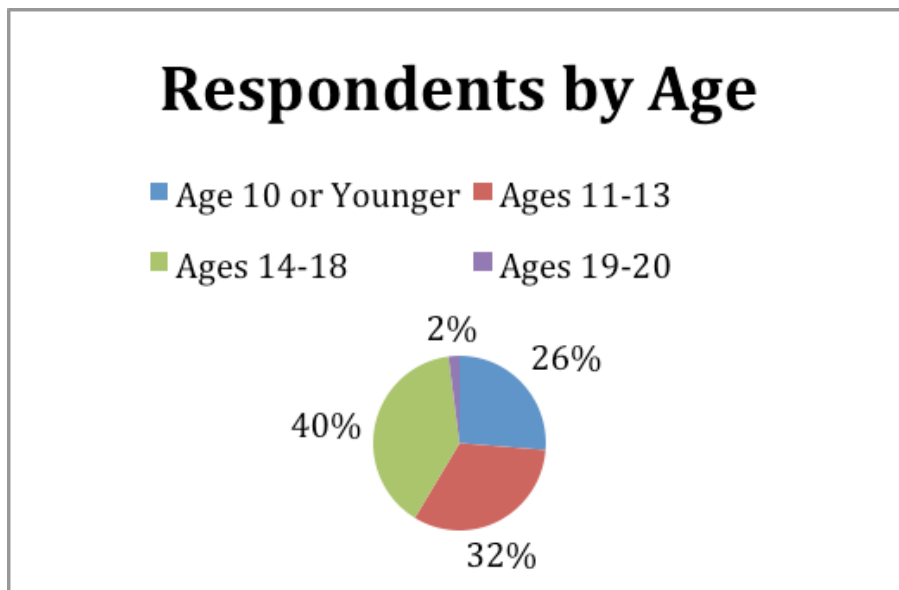Respondent Personal Demographics and Club Size
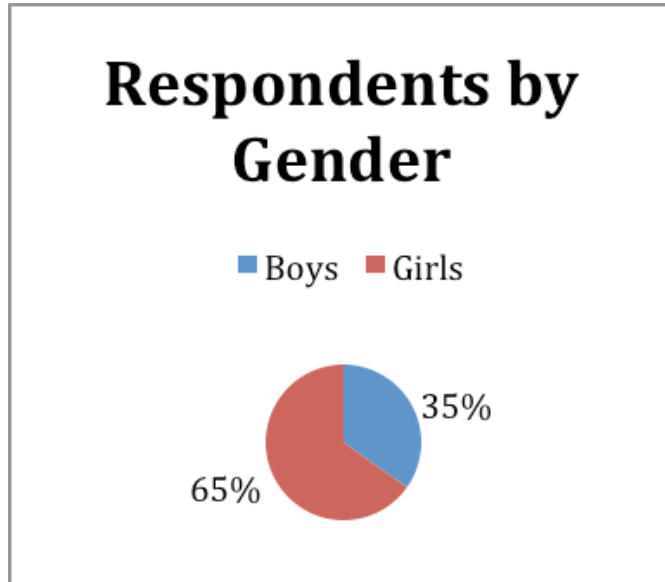
Figure 1-Gender

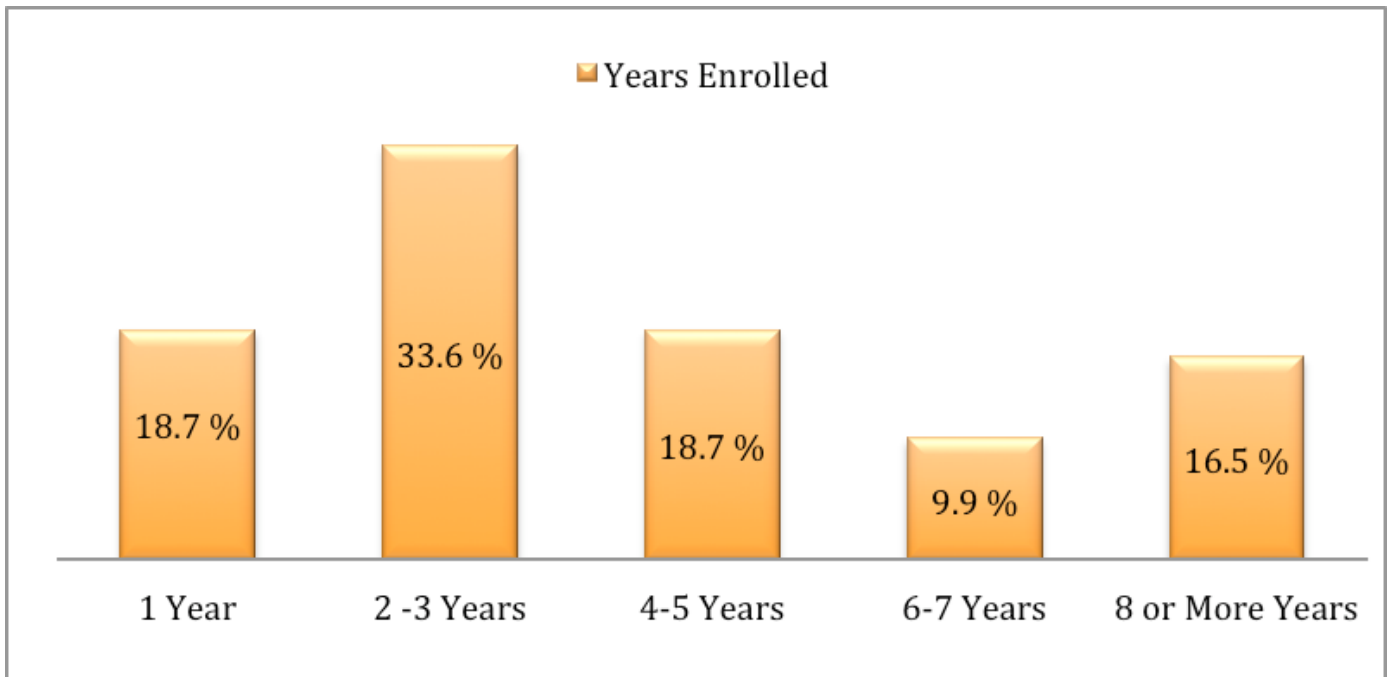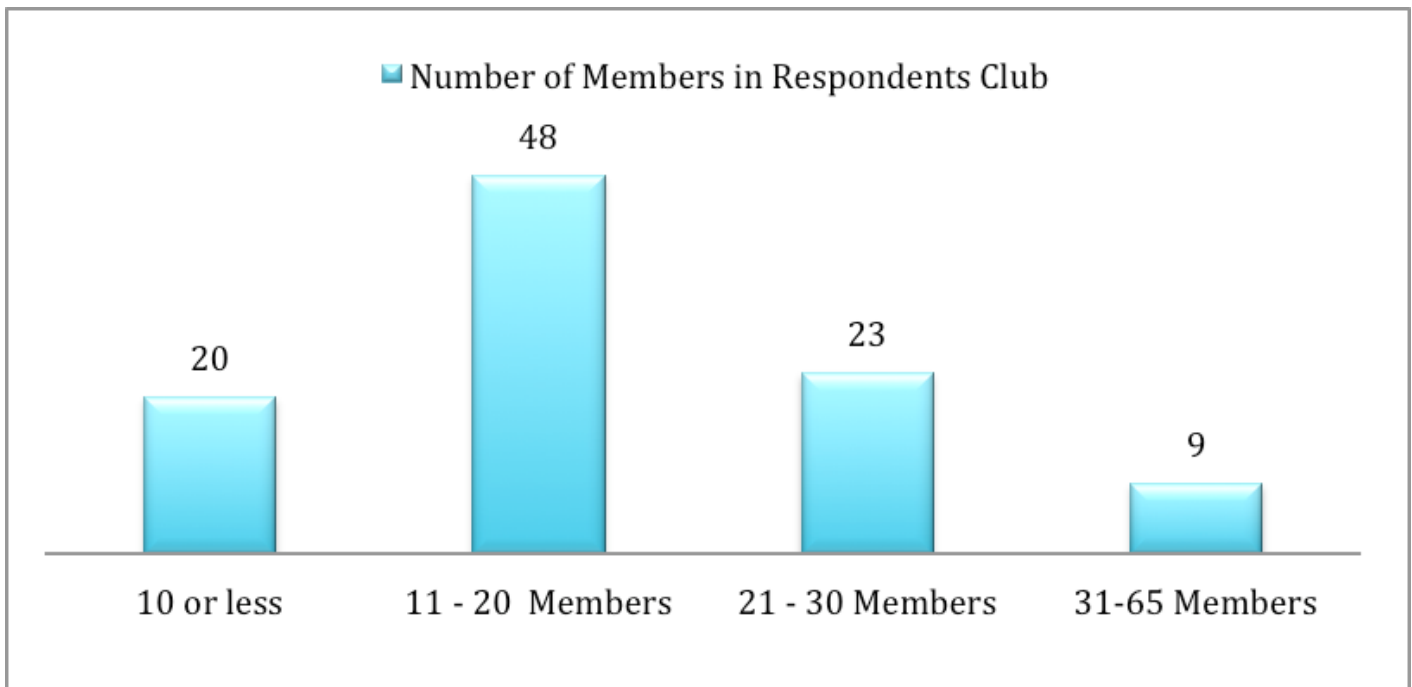

Figure 2-Age

Figure 3-Years Enrolled

Figure 4-Club Size

4-H Club Meeting Survey Results in Relationship to the Essential Elements

Survey results indicate that members are successfully experiencing opportunities for mastery through club participation. Members report that they almost or almost always have opportunities to learn new things at 4-H club meetings (90.1%). They state that members get better at things they already do well during meetings (81.1%). Members also report that they are able to contribute to the success of their 4-H clubs through meeting participation (94.5%). They are always or almost always proud of the projects that they completed (96.6%). As respondents get older, they are more likely to say that youth are in charge of the meeting, their 4-H club has rules and keeps them, that they get better at things they already do, and that their club is the best in the state.

Survey results illustrate that 4-H members gain a strong sense of belonging through participation in club meetings. Members overwhelmingly indicate that they are comfortable saying what they think at 4-H club meetings (87.8%). Members report that they are comfortable joining meeting activities (94.3%). Moreover, they report a belief that other members like them and that when someone in the group does well, other members are happy (93.3%). Additionally, 95.5% said that they are never or almost never teased in meetings.

More work in the area of ensuring that youth are not teased or bullied within or surrounding club meetings needs to be done. Of those surveyed, 30% of the boys indicated that they had been teased at club meetings. Of those, 10% said that they were teased almost always at meetings. Eleven percent of girls indicated that they had been teased at meetings, while 1.7% said they were almost always teased at meetings. The afore mentioned percentages were based on responses to three sub-set questions asking: 1) at 4-H club meetings, I am often teased , 2) at 4-H club meetings kids pick on one another, and 3) I feel comfortable joining in activities in my 4-H club meeting. It is critical that intentional efforts continue to ensure the delivery of programming that is emotionally safe for all participants.

Members overwhelmingly and consistently report that they see leaders as safe, caring adults. Of the respondents, 97.8% indicated that leaders are people 4-H members can trust, and 95.4% indicated that leaders help members to be successful. Conversely, 23.4% of the boys and 5.1% of girls responded that 4-H leaders never or almost never understand kids' problems.

Responses about clubs surveyed indicate that club leaders and others have done well in encouraging a spirit of generosity among members. West Virginia 4-H has a culture of encouraging individual and group service endeavors in

which clubs typically initiate local service projects as part of their annual club planning.

The survey questioned members about their experiences both in terms of generosity shown toward members in the club setting and in terms of the level of priority given to community service projects. Survey responses indicate that more experienced members always or almost always help newer members (90.1%) and that service projects are a priority for their clubs (88%).

Members report multiple opportunities to gain and employ independence through 4-H club participation. They report that they are always or almost always in charge of 4-H club meetings (83.9%). They report that kids usually talk more than grown-ups at 4-H meetings (70.4%) and that adults never or almost never talk more than kids at meetings (72.3%). 4-H club leaders are appropriately seen by members as adult facilitators who encourage, model, and provide opportunities for youth leadership.

While the generally positive results indicate a strong inclination toward the employment of youth leadership, they also demonstrate that, in some instances, the adult leadership of clubs does not always allow youth participation at a level indicative of the 4-H goal of providing opportunities for the members to discuss and make independent decisions about club matters.

Implications and Recommendations

Survey results provide a strong indication that the Essential Elements are being employed successfully in the West Virginia 4-H clubs that participated in this study. Volunteer leaders are establishing environments wherein members practice and experience the principles of belonging, independence, generosity and mastery at 4-H club meetings. Results highlight the important role that club leaders play through the delivery of the Essential Elements in club settings and indicate that club leaders have done well in encouraging a spirit of generosity and belonging among members. It is clear that club leaders are seen by members as adult facilitators who encourage, model and provide opportunities for youth to assume leadership roles.

Through participation in club meetings, 4-H members are comfortable joining activities, believe that others like them, and feel that members encourage each other. Members feel that they are able to master new skills and learn new things through club participation where they have opportunities to hold key leadership roles and express their opinions. Extension faculty, staff, and volunteers must reaffirm the importance of 4-H club meetings as an essential service delivery component and continually reinforce the efforts of club leaders in developing and sustaining positive relationships with members. Club leaders must be encouraged to continue providing opportunities for 4-H members to engage in a variety of new and interesting activities at club meetings and ensure that meetings are designed to encourage youth-led discussions, promote youth decision making, and to provide leadership opportunities in order to maximize opportunities for youth development of mastery and independence.

As a significant note, in order to prevent teasing and bullying, club leaders must be trained to define bullying as name calling, isolating, or excluding a members from the group and advised to carefully observe interactions among members so that they are able to quickly address potential issues. Club leaders must be encouraged to discuss behavioral expectations with members at meetings and other events, minimize unstructured time, and plan activities so that all members may participate equally in order to improve opportunities for young people to experience a sense of belonging at club meetings.

Finally, it is recommended that the study reported here be replicated to improve the generalizability of the findings.

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