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Former 4-H Key Club Members' Perceptions of the Impact of "Giving" Life Skills Preparation on Their Civic Engagement

Penny Pennington

Oklahoma State University, pennip@okstate.edu

M Craig Edwards

Oklahoma State University, edwardc@okstate.edu



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Former 4-H Key Club Members' Perceptions of the Impact of "Giving" Life Skills Preparation on Their Civic Engagement

Abstract

Does 4-H make an impact on the civic engagement of adults? If so, do former 4-H members view the impact as being greater than that of other programming? This article describes perceptions of former 4-H Key Club members regarding the application of "giving" life skills preparation on their civic engagement. The impact of youth organizations on acquisition of "giving" life skills is also described. Participants "agreed" they were applying "giving" life skills acquired through 4-H, and that those experiences had a "major" impact on their civic engagement. It is recommended that "giving" life skills programming be continued.

Penny Pennington

Assistant Professor
penninp@okstate.edu

M. Craig Edwards

Associate Professor
edwarmc@okstate.edu

Oklahoma State University
Stillwater, Oklahoma

Introduction and Conceptual Framework

Youth involved in serving their communities develop a lifelong pattern of civic engagement. More important, civic engagement is learned and must be introduced at an early age. Steve Culbertson, president and CEO of Youth Service America, is reported as saying that "an ethic of service cannot simply be turned on like a switch when a young adult turns 18" (p. 1) but rather an ethic of civic engagement must be developed beginning in our youth ("Adults Who Began Volunteering," 2002). A national study released by the Independent Sector and Youth Service America found that adults who were active as volunteers in their youth were more likely to give to their communities through volunteering and personal resources (Wetzstein, 2002).

Ladewig's and Thomas' (1987) national study regarding the impact of 4-H on civic engagement found skills and attitudes formed during youth carry over into adulthood. Historically, 4-H has focused on the development and growth of the individual; it continues to do so today. Youth are provided opportunities to learn skills to help them prepare for adult roles requiring both leadership and decision-making (Van Horn, Flanagan, & Thomson, 1998). Howard (2001) maintained that the mission of 4-H programming is to develop our youth into "capable, productive citizens, utilizing a variety of projects. The developmental life skills children gain through 4-H participation and involvement have lasting impacts" (p. 2).

4-H is one of the largest youth organizations in our nation (Howard, 2001; Van Horn, 2001). the organization's roots are often described as extending back to the "corn clubs" of the early-1900s. A membership peak of more than seven million club members in the 1970s marks its history (Van Horn, Flanagan, & Thomson, 1999). However, the future of 4-H programming may be uncertain as Extension faces radical change fomented by difficult economic times (Cantrell, Heinsohn, & Doebler, 1989) and shifting societal priorities. Nearly two decades after Ladewig and Thomas (1987) examined the impact of 4-H on a member's future civic engagement, understanding better how 4-H affects our youth, especially as it relates to their role as adult citizens, may be of greater importance now than ever before.

If the purpose of a youth group is to develop leadership and citizenship skills (Wylie, 1990) and we know that skills developed in one's youth carry into adulthood (Ladewig & Thomas, 1987; Radhakrishna, 2005), then 4-H should be able to document how their alumni are affecting the communities in which they reside through their civic engagement activities. In 4-H terms, the Targeting Life Skills (TLS) Model (Hendricks, 1998; Rollins, 2003) best describes civic engagement, specifically as "giving" skills. The TLS Model provides a clear opportunity for measuring impact of 4-H participation. In times of depleting budgets, evidence of significant and lasting impact could be used as rationale for continued funding of Extension's most visible program and one of the nation's largest youth organizations, 4-H.

As the federal government continues to delegate more responsibilities to states, state budgets will tighten. In such an environment, accountability of state agencies becomes increasingly important. To meet these accountability demands, the strengths and weaknesses of the 4-H program must be documented, and these data interpreted to legislators and other key persons. (Boyd, Herring, & Briers, 1992).

Through impact studies, 4-H could show not only how 4-H programming has impacted youth, but, moreover, how 4-H alumni are currently impacting their communities and the nation.

The Targeting Life Skills Model (TLS) serves as a useful tool in the design of 4-H impact studies (Bailey & Deen, 2002). The TLS Model was created as an inclusive tool for a variety of important life skills. It was developed based on the premise that the goal of youth organizations was to provide opportunities for life skill development that would be carried into adulthood. Additionally, these life skills are developed through experience and mastery that is achieved through repeated practice.

The 4 H's from the 4-H Clover, Head, Heart, Hands, and Health serve to illustrate the TLS model. Two general categories of skills are included under each of the four headings. For example, Hands is subdivided into Giving and Working. Each of these areas is again subdivided into specific life skills. "Giving" life skills, for example, include: leadership, citizenship, community service/volunteering, and contribution to group (Hendricks, 1998).

The TLS Model was also designed for use not only among 4-H youth programmers but also for youth programmers outside of 4-H. A unique feature of the model is an "ages and stages" approach to life skills. Developmentally appropriate tasks are assigned to specific life skills for four age groups, thus improving the measurability of programming impact. Clearly stated objectives for a program such as 4-H provide an opportunity for more effective evaluation. In examining "giving" life skills, age-appropriate learning objectives, i.e., adult (Figure 1), were used to guide this study.

In Oklahoma, the TLS model is delivered through 4-H Key Club programming. Oklahoma's 4-H Key Club was established in 1950 as an honor society recognizing outstanding 4-H members. A youth applies to become an Oklahoma 4-H Key Club member and is then nominated to the state-level by his or her respective county. Minimum requirements for applicants include: 4-H membership, 15 years of age during year of application, and a minimum of 400 points accumulated on the membership application. Points are awarded through various activities, including participation in community activities, holding a leadership position in 4-H, and promoting 4-H through presentations. Four-H Key Club nominees become Key Club members on approval of the state Key Club officers and advisors (Oklahoma 4-H, 2004; C. Cox, personal communication, August 4, 2004).

Figure 1.
"Giving" Life Skills: Learning Objectives for Adults

<p>Community Service/Volunteering</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Makes significant contributions to projects of interest • Values contributions to a common good • Leads community service 	<p>Contributes to Group</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helps group set and reach larger goals effort • Makes effective contribution to group cause • Sees beyond group to further applications
<p>Leadership</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizes groups to accomplish a purpose • Helps others do things their way • Can choose appropriately between leadership styles • Understands personal strengths • Teaches others new skills • Wants adult leadership roles; allows for exploration 	<p>Responsible Citizenship</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May have idealized view of patriotism • Understands allegiance to one's country • Evaluates loyalty to one's country in terms of personal goals and values • Thinks globally • Wants to get outside of own community • Develops community

Rollins, T.J. (2003). Department of Agricultural and Extension Education, The Pennsylvania State University. (Adapted from P.A. Hendricks, *Developing youth curriculum using the targeting life skills model*. Ames: Iowa State University, University Extension.)

Objectives

One objective of the research was to describe perceptions of former Oklahoma 4-H Key Club members regarding the application of "giving" life skills preparation on their civic engagement. Specifically, giving life skills, defined as skills encompassing community service/volunteering, citizenship, contribution to group, and leadership (Hendricks, 1998; Rollins, 2003), are described. A second objective was to describe perceptions of former Oklahoma 4-H Key Club members regarding the impact of participation in youth organizations on their acquisition of "giving" life skills. Specific research questions that guided the study follow.

1. What were selected characteristics of former Oklahoma 4-H Key Club members?
2. What were former Oklahoma 4-H Key Club members' perceptions about their application of "giving" life skills?
3. What were former Oklahoma 4-H Key Club members' perceptions about the impact of 4-H "giving" life skills preparation on their civic engagement?
4. What were former Oklahoma 4-H Key Club members' perceptions about the impact of other "giving" life skills preparation on their civic engagement?
5. Did significant differences ($p < .05$) exist between former Oklahoma 4-H Key Club members' perceptions about the impact of 4-H "giving" life skills preparation and the impact of other "giving" life skills preparation on their civic engagement?

Methods and Procedures

The target population ($N = 4582$) for the descriptive study was former Oklahoma 4-H Key Club members who were listed in the Oklahoma 4-H database generated by Oklahoma Cooperative Extension. A simple random sample was used (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996); sample size was determined based upon the table "Determining Sample Size for Research Activities" (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). The responding sample consisted of 356 participants who provided useable responses. Data were collected using a telephone questionnaire. Dillman's (1978; 2000) procedures for telephone questionnaires were used in both the design and implementation stages of data collection.

The instrument was designed based on the Targeting Life Skills Model (Hendricks, 1998) as adapted by Rollins (2003) for "ages and stages." The questionnaire consisted of three parts. Part one was designed to measure participants' perceptions about their application of "giving" life skills. Participants indicated their agreement with 24 statements by responding to a five-point summated scale. The points on the scale were "1" = "Strongly Disagree," "2" = "Disagree," "3" = "Undecided," "4" = "Agree," and "5" = "Strongly Agree." The 24 items were divided into four constructs containing six questions each. Cronbach's coefficient alpha reliability estimate was calculated for each construct: "Community Service and Volunteering" (.83), "Citizenship" (.75), "Contribution to Group Effort(s)" (.87), and "Leadership" (.81). The overall scale yielded a reliability estimate of .92.

Part two of the instrument was designed to measure participants' perceptions about the *impact* of 4-H "giving" life skills preparation and other "giving" life skills preparation on their civic engagement. Participants indicated their agreement with eight statements (two per construct). The points on the scale were "1" = "None," "2" = "Minor," "3" = "Moderate," "4" = "Major," and "5" = "Critical" Impact. Part three of the instrument was designed to gather data on selected characteristics of the participants.

A panel of experts, Oklahoma State University faculty members and Oklahoma Cooperative Extension district supervisors, reviewed the instrument for content and face validity. The instrument was pilot-tested as a telephone survey to control for complexity related to length of questions and response categories (Dillman, 1978; 2000). Modifications were made, and the instrument was pilot-tested a second time. Both tests used a random sample drawn from the target population; these participants were excluded from the final sample.

An advance postcard was sent to the sample to increase response rate; a response rate of 85% was achieved. Substitution bias was controlled through calling procedures requiring 10 attempted

contacts and varied calling times (Dillman, 1978; 2000). Research questions one, two, three, and four were analyzed descriptively with frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. Research question five was analyzed by computing *t*-tests. Data were imported into an SPSS datafile and analyzed by the researchers using SPSS for Windows, v. 7.5. In analyzing the data, an alpha for all statistical procedures was set a priori at .05.

Findings

Selected characteristics of the sample are described in Table 1. Nearly two-thirds of the former Oklahoma 4-H Key Club members were female. Of those who reported ethnicity, 9-in-10 were Caucasian. Almost two-thirds of the respondents held a four-year university degree, and 3-in-10 had earned advanced degrees. Nearly 4-in-10 reported earning \$50,000 or more annually. Respondents' places of residence were nearly evenly divided between five categories ranging from rural farms and ranches to large cities.

Regarding selected aspects of civic engagement, 96% of the sample reported voting in the last three years, and more than one-half had voted 10 or more times (Table 1). A number of former Oklahoma 4-H Key Club members (95%) indicated they served as volunteers. About 4-in-10 volunteered up to 10 hours monthly, and more than one-half worked as a volunteer 11 or more hours each month. Nearly 8-in-10 respondents belonged to between one and five organizations (excluding work). All but a small minority (< 15%) of former 4-H Key Club members reported holding formal leadership positions during the last three years. More than 6-in-10 had served in three or more leadership roles during that time.

Table 1.
Selected Characteristics of Former Oklahoma 4-H Key Club Members (n = 356)

Characteristics	<i>f</i>	%
Personal		
Gender		
Male	128	36.0
Female	228	64.0
Ethnicity		
American Indian	3	0.9
Caucasian	319	89.6
Unreported	34	9.6
Education		
Less than High School	6	1.7
High School or GED	34	9.6
Some College or Technical School	56	15.7
Associate's Degree	23	6.5
Bachelor's Degree	131	36.8

Master's Degree	77	21.6
Professional or Doctoral Degree	29	8.2
Annual Income		
Less than \$20,000	51	14.3
\$20,000 to \$49,999	137	38.5
\$50,000 to \$79,999	70	19.7
\$80,000 to 124,999	35	9.8
\$125,000 or more	28	7.9
Unreported	35	9.8
Size of Community of Residence		
Rural, Farm/Ranch	78	21.9
Rural, Non-Farm	77	21.6
Town, less than 20,000 residents	73	20.5
City, 20,000 to 99,999 residents	67	18.8
Large City, 100,000 or more residents	61	17.1
Aspects of Civic Engagement		
Number of Times Voted in the Last Three Years		
None	15	4.2
1 to 3 times	39	11.0
4 to 9 times	102	28.7
10 to 14 times	89	25.0
15 or more times	109	30.6
Unreported	2	0.6

Number of Hours Volunteer per Month		
None	18	5.1
Up to 5 hours	56	15.7
6 to 10 hours	97	27.2
11 to 15 hours	58	16.3
16 to 20 hours	36	10.1
More than 20 hours	91	25.6
Number of Organizations Belong to Other Than Work		
None	19	5.3
1 to 2	104	29.2
3 to 5	180	50.6
6 to 9	42	11.8
10 or more	11	3.1
Number of Formal Leadership Positions Held in the Last Three Years		
None	48	13.5
1 to 2	89	25.0
3 to 5	136	38.2
6 to 9	44	12.4
10 or more	39	11.0

Former Oklahoma 4-H Key Club members' perceptions about their application of "giving" life skills are reported in Table 2. The mean score for all 24 items describing members' perceptions was 4.16 or slightly higher than "agree." The concept of "giving" life skills was operationalized as four constructs (Hendricks, 1998): "community service and volunteering," "citizenship," "contribution to group effort(s)," and "leadership." "Citizenship" earned the highest composite mean score (4.30). "Leadership" had the second highest composite mean score (4.13). "Community service and volunteering" (4.11) and "contribution to group effort(s)" (4.07) were rated third and fourth highest, respectively.

The construct "citizenship" included the four highest rated items (Table 2). The highest rated item was, "I determine loyalty to my country based on my own values and goals" (*Mean* = 4.62; *SD* = .59). The next three highest rated items were approaching the midway point between "agree" and

"strongly agree": "I would compare my allegiance to my country with the same dedication that an armed forces member might have" (*Mean* = 4.48; *SD* = .69); "I think beyond the community to how situations affect not only the country but also the world" (*Mean* = 4.42; *SD* = .67); "I have a patriotic view similar to one that might be held by a member of the armed services" (*Mean* = 4.41; *SD* = .76). The three lowest rated items were dispersed within three of the four constructs, excluding "leadership"; they were, "I am involved as a leader in organizing community service activities . . ." (*Mean* = 3.63; *SD* = 1.12); "I am involved in helping groups determine what goals they are trying to reach" (*Mean* = 3.78; *SD* = .90); "I keep up-to-date on community issues and try to influence other community members" (*Mean* = 3.86; *SD* = .88).

Table 2.
Former Oklahoma 4-H Key Club Members' Perceptions about Their Application of "Giving" Life Skills

"Giving" Life Skills	<i>M^a</i>	<i>SD</i>
Community Service & Volunteering		
I contribute financial or other resources to volunteer organizations	4.22	.77
I use my resources to help provide for others	4.32	.67
I am involved as a leader in community organizations . . .	4.07	.99
I contribute my time or talent to community service activities	4.09	.86
I support organizations that provide for the needs of our community	4.36	.69
I am involved as a leader in organizing community service activities	3.63	1.12
Composite Mean		4.11
Citizenship		
I have a patriotic view similar to one that might be held by a member of the armed services	4.41	.76
I would compare my allegiance to my country with the same dedication that an armed forces member might have	4.48	.69
I determine loyalty to my country based on my own values and goals	4.62	.59
I think beyond the community to how situations affect not only the country but also the world	4.42	.67
I choose to be involved in activities or organizations that impact people outside of my own community	4.02	.86
I keep up-to-date on community issues and try to influence other community members	3.86	.88

Composite Mean		4.30
Contribution to Group Effort(s)		
I am involved in helping groups determine what goals they are trying to reach	3.78	.90
I use my personal strengths to their fullest in helping to get the job done	4.25	.70
I regularly apply the knowledge that I have learned by being a group member to other activities	4.19	.73
I am involved in helping groups at work or in the community accomplish their goals	4.19	.77
Groups in which I am involved depend on me to help get the job done	4.13	.81
I look for opportunities for my group(s) to help other organizations accomplish their goals	3.90	.83
Composite Mean		4.07
Leadership		
I am involved in organizing groups to accomplish a specific goal or purpose	3.91	1.05
I help other team members accomplish activities in their own way	4.18	.72
I regularly adjust my course of action depending on the individual or situation with whom/which I am working	4.27	.72
I know and use the strengths that I have to help me perform as a leader or member of a group	4.36	.62
I help individuals or groups of people to learn new skills	4.17	.79
I accept or seek out leadership opportunities for myself	3.90	1.00
Composite Mean		4.13
Overall Mean		4.16
Note. ^a Scale: "5" = "Strongly Agree" . . . "1" = "Strongly Disagree."		

Former Oklahoma 4-H Key Club members' rated the impact of "giving" life skills preparation on their civic engagement depending on the source, i.e., "4-H" versus "Other." Table 3 reports former members' ratings. Respondents rated 4-H as either approaching or exceeding having a "major"

impact on their acquisition of the "giving" life skills they applied when engaged in civic activities; this perception held true across all four "giving" life skills constructs. The composite mean score for "4-H Impact" was 4.00 ($SD = .66$). Conversely, the impact of "Other" sources of "giving" life skills was rated as either slightly below or approaching midway between "moderate" and "major" for each of the four constructs. The composite mean score for "Other Impact" was 3.43 ($SD = .75$). T -tests indicated that the mean differences between sources were significant for each construct and overall ($mean\ difference = .571$; t -value = 12.976*; $p < .05$).

Table 3.

Former Oklahoma 4-H Key Club Members' Perceptions about the Impact of "Giving" Life Skills Preparation on Their Civic Engagement

Youth Organization Impact	<i>M^a</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean Difference</i>	<i>t-value</i>
Community Service & Volunteering				
4-H Impact	3.98	.78		
Other Impact	3.36	.94		
			.615	11.522*
				$d = .61$
Citizenship				
4-H Impact	3.98	.79		
Other Impact	3.45	.91		
			.537	9.368*
				$d = .50$
Contribution to Group Effort(s)				
4-H Impact	3.94	.82		
Other Impact	3.46	.91		
			.478	8.654*
				$d = .46$
Leadership				
4-H Impact	4.10	.73		
Other Impact	3.45	.92		

			.655	12.798*
				$d = .68$
Composite Mean 4-H Impact	4.00	.66		
Composite Mean Other Impact	3.43	.75		
			.571	12.976*
				$d = .69$
<i>Note.</i> ^a Scale: "5" = "Critical," "4" = "Major," "3" = "Moderate," "2" = "Minor," and "1" = "None." * $p < .05$.				

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

Former Oklahoma 4-H Key Club members were predominantly Caucasian females who were college graduates. Similarly, Schlutt (1987) found that 4-H alumni actively involved in their communities tend to have higher levels of education, and Seevers and Dormody (1995) also concluded that a majority of former 4-H members were female. Former members were also frequent voters who worked as volunteers in their local communities. Many had served or were serving in formal leadership positions in the community organization(s) to which they belonged.

Respondents "agreed" that they were applying the "giving" life skills acquired through participation in 4-H, including skills related to community service/volunteering, citizenship, contribution to group(s), and leadership. They most strongly agreed about their application of skills in the area of citizenship. Previous studies also found that 4-H youth participation serves as an effective means of developing future civic engagement (Ladewig & Thomas, 1987; Radhakrishna, 2005; Schlutt, 1987; Van Horn, 2001). Specifically, Cantrell, Heinsohn, and Doebler (1989) found a positive relationship between both leadership and citizenship life skills and 4-H youth participation. What is more, Boyd et al. (1992) concluded that leadership life skill development increased as participation in 4-H increased.

Participants in this study perceived that experiences in 4-H had a "major" impact on their civic engagement, while "other" sources of "giving" life skills were rated as having less impact. *T*-tests revealed that perceptions of former members' about the impact of skills by source--4-H versus Other--were significantly different. Moreover, when effect sizes were calculated, the mean differences for all four constructs and overall were also practically significant. With exception of "contribution to group effort(s)," the effect sizes were either medium or approaching large in magnitude (Green, Salkind, & Akey, 1997).

The following recommendations are offered for future practice and research.

1. In the interest of helping youth to acquire skills that support and augment their civic engagement as adults, Oklahoma's 4-H "giving" life skills programming should continue. Moreover, program leaders are encouraged to consider how it could be best configured and delivered to reach the maximum number of 4-H youth possible. Specific practices could include the following:
 - a. share findings of this and related studies with volunteers who have expressed an interest in life skills programming for youth that focuses on the development of leadership, citizenship, community service/volunteering, and contribution to group;
 - b. provide training for volunteers who express an interest in leading and delivering "giving" life skills programming;
 - c. share findings with, and solicit support from, community groups interested in creating civic engagement among all citizens, including youth, such as Rotary, Lions, and Kiwanis Clubs;
 - d. develop promotional materials highlighting the findings of this study for distribution to interested audiences and for display at selected events and activities (Radhakrishna, 2005);

- e. identify local 4-H Key Club alumni and past participants in "giving" life skills programming who agree to provide "testimony" (i.e., anecdotal evidence) of its impact on their civic engagement and community involvement (Radhakrishna, 2005). Then, use these individuals to assist with future delivery of "giving" life skills programming.
2. Although the 4-H "giving" life skills preparation was perceived by participants to be influential in their exercising of "leadership," several items dispersed throughout the other constructs, in which "leadership" was implicit, were among the lowest rated items. For example, respondents were less certain about the role of "giving" life skills preparation as it related to leadership functions that involved organizing activities, influencing others, or determining group goals. Carter and Spotanski (1989) reached a similar conclusion based on their study of high school youth in Iowa. This incongruence between "giving" life skills preparation and selected aspects of "leadership" warrants further study.
3. Additional research should be carried out to randomly select a similar group of Oklahoma residents who were not 4-H Club members and thus could not attribute any "giving" life skills preparation to 4-H. These subjects could be treated as a comparison or "counterfactual" group. One objective of more research would be to better explain the role of 4-H and other sources of "giving" life skills preparation on one's civic engagement as an adult by conducting selected inferential analyses.
4. Arguably, "other" as it pertains to various non-4-H sources of "giving" life skills preparation is too general (see Radhakrishna, 2005). It would be useful to identify these sources and to determine if some sources were perceived to have had a greater impact than others, and, in the case of former 4-H Key Club members, if any were strongly associated with one's views about the impact of his or her 4-H "giving" life skills preparation (i.e., covariants or moderating variables).

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