The Challenges Associated with Change in 4-H/Youth Development

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Abstract
This article discusses a study documenting the beliefs about proactive change among volunteers and Extension staff who develop policy for local Indiana 4-H Programs. Data analysis indicated that volunteers believe in the core values of the 4-H Program; recommend that the 4-H Program should reach more and different youth; and believe that the program's rural image inhibits progress in these areas. Staff interactions with volunteers, lack of parental involvement, policy-making group organization and structure, and youth representation were cited as barriers to a more open, inclusive organization. The article makes recommendations based on the study's findings and suggests topics for further research.

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Introduction/Theoretical Framework

The Cooperative Extension Service through the years has operated as if it were the same thing to all people and has been criticized for becoming too comfortable with a group of loyal followers rather than concerning itself with a new and changing customer pool. Extension's success at building an alliance of individuals who are willing to address specialized needs and support programs targeted toward specific audiences may well determine its future (Warner, Christenson, Dillman, & Salant, 1996).

A 1989 National Initiative Task Force on Youth-at-Risk suggested that Extension needed to begin rethinking the way it conducted business and work more effectively to address the needs of today's young people. How well Extension is able to identify and overcome both real and perceived barriers affects the ability of Extension to deal more effectively with critical youth needs. This also involves significant individual, institutional, and organizational change (Rennekamp & Gerhard, 1992).

There are tensions and fears associated with change. Change in the Extension System is a collaborative effort among the Extension educator and lay leaders, the learner or learner groups and systems. Individual attitudes toward change and personal beliefs about the opportunities for change and growth seem to be critical factors in organizational development, yet scholars have tended to fail to recognize their importance (Silverberg, Betts, Huebner, & Cota-Robles, 1996).

Purpose/Objectives

Research was conducted to document and interpret current beliefs toward proactive change of

staff and volunteers involved in determining policy for the county-level 4-H/ Youth Development Program in Indiana. The study was designed to provide baseline data on the relationships and interactions among volunteers who develop policy for local 4-H Programs and the professional staff with whom they work. The baseline data adds to the body of knowledge that the Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service uses to determine in-service needs for professional staff and volunteers, resulting in a more open and inclusive Indiana 4-H/Youth Development Program. To accomplish the purpose, the following guiding research questions were employed.

1. What attitudinal similarities or differences were found among staff with extreme scores on the Organizational Change Orientation Scale© (OCOS)?

2. What attitudinal similarities or differences were found among staff and the members of the volunteer 4-H policy-making groups with which these staff members work?

3. Did the attitudes of the members of local 4-H policy-making groups reflect or parallel those of the staff member assigned to work with them?

4. Were volunteer 4-H policy-making groups resistant to working with at-risk or new populations in the community?

5. In communities where individuals with nonfunctional OCOS© scores were found, what types of reasons were given for the 4-H/Youth Development Program not being more open to change and innovation?

Methods/Procedures

The population for this research was defined as 4-H/Youth Development Educators and the local 4-H policy-making board members with whom they worked. These individuals are responsible for writing and implementing 4-H program policies and guidelines on a local level. Purposeful sampling was used in determining the individuals selected for case study analysis because it allowed for the selection of information rich cases for in-depth study (Bernard, 1995; Patton, 1990).

The phenomena were studied by employing a mixed design, three-phase approach. In Phase 1, a quantitative measure, the 36-item Organizational Change Orientation Scale© (Jones & Bearley, 1986), was administered to each of the 97 4-H/Youth Staff members in Indiana (82 or 84.5% completed and returned) to assess their individual approaches to handling organizational change. The Organizational Change Orientation Scale© (OCOS©) uses a six-point Likert-type scale format and was developed by Jones and Bearley (1986) to assess the tendencies of individuals to behave in predictable ways in response to change.

Phase 2 consisted of audiotaped, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with nine staff members, three from each of Jones and Bearley's (1986) three categories of how people respond to change as indicated by the OCOS© inventory. These interviews helped the researcher gain perspective to ascertain whether there was a relationship between 4-H staff members' attitudes towards change, the volunteers with whom they work, and the openness and innovativeness of the local 4-H program. Using the OCOS© inventory alone would have limited participant responses and failed to provide a complete understanding of the structure and essence of their beliefs and value systems.

During Phase 3, audiotaped group interviews in each of the participating staff members' counties were conducted with the volunteer members of the 4-H policy-making board. Volunteers attending the selected meetings comprised the interview groups with a range in the number of participants from five to 22. To assure anonymity of volunteer responses, the local staff were not in attendance during the interviews. These group interviews provided additional high-quality data allowing the researcher the opportunity to look for consistencies or discrepancies in the beliefs of the staff member and the volunteers.

The triangulation of data methods and types allowed the use of different "lenses" or perspectives and offered not only a more holistic view of each community setting but also offered cross-validity checks, thus strengthening the study's usefulness for other settings (Asher, 1992; Marshall & Rossman, 1995, Morse, 1994; Patton, 1990).

Findings

The analysis of multiple data sources (OCOS© inventory, in-depth and group interviews, ES 237 Statistical Reports, Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service, 1995; 1999 and minutes from local 4-H policy-making meetings) led the researcher to develop the following conclusions.

Extreme Organizational Change Orientation Scale© Scores

Extreme scores were not discovered when the OCOS© was administered to the Purdue Cooperative Extension Service staff. Rather, scoring tendencies were discovered and utilized to sort individuals into three groups:

- Those who had a tendency to embrace change,
- Those who exhibited multi-directional scores and tended to be selective about the changes

they chose to support, and

- Those whose tendency was toward neutrality (neither supportive nor resistive) regarding change.

Those who had a tendency to embrace change were able to indicate an approach they used when introducing change into the local 4-H Program. In each case, the educators identified key individuals with whom they would first discuss a proposed change. These individuals would then work with them to introduce the change to the local 4-H policy-making group. The reason given for this approach was that the volunteers began to "own" the idea, rather than it being one brought in from "outside" the local community.

Educators who were selective about change openly discussed (with their 4-H policy-making group) their hesitance to introduce change at the local 4-H Program level. Each discussed how uncomfortable they personally felt with change, yet acknowledged that change was necessary in order to move the 4-H Program forward.

Those educators who were neutral to change exhibited differing attitudes that would, as a group, still follow the Jones and Bearley (1986) description as inactive, neutral, submissive, and nonproductive. These would be labeled as nonfunctional attitudes or behaviors. The educator who exhibited the highest score in the nonfunctional category of the OCOS© inventory also exhibited the highest score discovered on the dysfunctional scale of the instrument. This educator was generally resistive to change or new initiatives for the 4-H Program and described behaviors that would indicate an operational tendency as a "gatekeeper" of information.

Attitudinal Similarities and Differences Among Staff and Volunteers

There was evidence that the attitudes of volunteer policy-makers did tend to parallel those of the staff member they worked with (especially when increasing the involvement of youth in the 4-H Program). Members of the volunteer groups believed, as did staff, in the "goodness" of the 4-H/Youth Development Program. Volunteers tended to emphasize that involvement in the 4-H Program was important to them and that youth currently involved greatly benefit.

While desiring increased membership, these groups did not necessarily have a plan or vision for fulfilling this wish. They did not typically discuss new ways of reaching youth beyond the traditional club model, although a few of them did exhibit slight awareness of 4-H outreach efforts.

Volunteers echoed the sentiments of the staff member they worked with in regard to future funding for the 4-H Program. If the staff member felt funding was an issue, it was discovered that the volunteers had similar concerns. In the three cases where staff members felt that future funding was not a concern, little discussion regarding funding was generated during the group interviews, nor evidenced in minutes of meetings. Two educators mentioned the procurement of grant funds for special programs but did not deem it necessary to discuss these grants or programs with the 4-H policy-making group.

Resistance to Working with New Audiences of Youth

There was no evidence to suggest that the volunteer groups in this study were resistant to working with new youth audiences. Rather, it appeared that educators had not challenged volunteers to consider new or different delivery methods (designed to broaden the youth audience) as part of the 4-H Program responsibility at the local level. In one instance, the educator made it clear that, while he viewed his responsibility to youth development as extending beyond the traditional 4-H club model, he did not believe that same responsibility had been extended to the local 4-H Council.

Reasons Given for Not Being More Open to Change and Innovation

Professional Staff and Their Interactions with Volunteers

Professional staffing patterns was one reason discovered for the 4-H/Youth Development Program not being more open to change and innovation. Some individuals felt "torn" between serving the traditional 4-H club program and new statewide initiatives that target specific youth audiences. Some educators worked as information "gatekeepers." They did not see the necessity of sharing with volunteers their ideas, work with new audiences, or collaborative efforts with other youth serving agencies. Some staff also implied they would be "taken to task" by volunteers if it was perceived that their work efforts beyond the traditional 4-H club model hampered progress in, or commitment to, the traditional realm.

Lack of Parental Involvement

Volunteer group participants repeatedly expressed their belief that parents' lack of time, knowledge, and understanding of the 4-H Program were factors that inhibited new youth from being involved in 4-H Programs. They further implied that youth were not successful in the 4-H Program if they did not have parental support. In several instances, a reference to family life styles the volunteers perceived to be different from their own was named a cause for lack of youth involvement in, and commitment to, the 4-H Program.

Implications such as these indicate some volunteers' lack of knowledge and understanding of societal changes. It also suggests the 4-H/Youth Development Program may not provide a clear

explanation of the program's benefits to youth, or its operational structure.

The 4-H Program's Rural Image

Both volunteers and staff expressed frustration that the 4-H Program is still viewed as a traditional, agricultural program available primarily to farm youth or those with the ability to raise animals. Those involved in the program realize the many opportunities for youth beyond an agricultural realm. While cherishing the 4-H Program's history, they perceived the rural image as problematic when attempting to introduce the program to new youth audiences.

4-H Policy-Making Group Membership

Individual membership ranged from 1 to 30 years, and 74 of the 91 group members interviewed, or 81%, had been 4-H members in their youth. Six of the counties each had a single member with no 4-H membership experience. This reflects policy-making groups that exhibit few dimensions of diversity. As suggested by Houle (1997), organizations that exhibit a "sameness" in membership may be narrow in their vision, may allow the past to dominate the present, may lack fresh views, and may become rigid and inflexible when establishing policies.

The general tendency of the groups was to be fairly content with the 4-H Program as it was and to focus much of their effort on the traditional 4-H Club Program. Variations in these groups' awareness of staff efforts beyond the traditional program were slight. It was discovered that only one group reviewed specific goals, objectives, and values of the 4-H Program. Eight of the nine groups seemed to be interested in and mindful of enrollment numbers for the county's 4-H Program, rather than in a vision for the future of the program.

4-H policy-making groups in Indiana possess a variety of titles, purposes, and conditions for operation (e.g., 4-H Councils, Fair Boards, Agricultural Associations, Boards of Directors). This multiplicity of organizations, titles, and functions currently causes confusion for staff and volunteers when state and local policy issues arise.

Youth Representation on 4-H Policy-Making Groups

Youth were obviously under-represented as members of the policy-making groups as a whole. Those youth who were present during group interviews shared a lack of understanding of the respective council on which they served, and, in general, a reluctance to speak up and share their ideas or suggestions. Those policy-making groups without youth representation indicated they gained youth input from adults who work with youth.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made to enhance the image and effectiveness of the Indiana 4-H Program in reaching new youth audiences.

1. The Department Head for 4-H/Youth Development should reaffirm the mission and goals of the 4-H/Youth Development Program. This should be accompanied by a request to staff and volunteers to recommit to and periodically review the mission and goals. They should further establish a means to measure progress toward the mission and goals in the local 4-H Program.

2. A reexamination of the definition of 4-H/Youth Development is needed. This examination should include input from staff at all levels of the organization, as well as existing and potential adult volunteers and youth. With the appropriate knowledge and training, 4-H/Youth Development educators will serve in a supportive and facilitative role, thus creating an environment and process that will allow volunteers to establish their own local plans for 4-H outreach efforts.

3. Educators who have successfully implemented strategies for 4-H/Youth Development work beyond the traditional club model should be recognized for these efforts and encouraged to share their successes with their peers.

4. Individuals involved in all levels of the program, from administration, staff, and volunteers, to the youth and parents involved, should be challenged to more accurately describe the benefits of the 4-H Program for youth. All of these groups have responsibility for the public image of the program to potential new youth. Work should be done with state and local extension staff to heighten awareness and encourage individuals to promote the fact that the 4-H Program is delivered in multiple ways, to multiple audiences, with multiple results and benefits. There is no one "right" way to deliver or evaluate the program, just as there is not a single benefit to program participants.

5. In-service education in the areas of leadership, diversity, collaboration, grant writing, and effective operations of boards and councils should be conducted for both staff and volunteers

to prepare them for future work with more diverse audiences of youth.

6. Staff and local policy-making group members should be encouraged to review membership policies of the local organization. They should be challenged to include multiple dimensions of diversity in their membership and should consider defined terms of appointment or a limitation on the number of consecutive terms an individual may serve. They should also be reminded of the importance of establishing a standard form for the minutes of their meetings so that all essential information can be later referenced, and approved.

7. Youth input is desired and needed at the local level to keep the 4-H Program and policies youth focused and relevant. Token youth representation will not effectively accomplish this end. Local 4-H policy-making groups should be educated about the effective contributions youth can make to the program and be encouraged to seek youth representatives who will serve as full partners within the organization. This partnership will benefit the youth, the 4-H organization, and the entire community.

Topics for Further Research

1. Similar studies should be conducted to further develop and ascertain the understanding of staff and volunteer relationships, and their effect on the implementation of the 4-H/ Youth Development Program at the community level.

2. The methodology should be replicated in other state Extension Services to determine similarities or differences that may be due to differing volunteer structures or staffing in the 4-H Program.

3. Similar studies should be conducted with other 4-H groups (e.g., adult 4-H volunteers or teen leaders) to ascertain the effectiveness of these individuals' relationships with staff and their effect on the implementation of the 4-H/Youth Development Program at the local level.

4. Additional research is needed to ascertain the structure and effectiveness of the various types of 4-H policy-making groups in Indiana.

5. Focus group research should be conducted with youth and adults, representing both participants and non-participants, to determine strategies for promoting the advantages and opportunities the 4-H Program affords youth in an effort to help dispel the traditional, rural, agrarian image.

Caution should be used in generalizing results obtained from this research to other situations. The study focused on individuals who were willing to participate and who agreed to mechanically recorded interviews. Especially in the group setting, the participants may not have been truly representative of all individuals involved in the local policy-making board. Due to the method of selecting staff members for participation, the Indiana counties represented in this study were not geographically or demographically representative of the state as a whole.

The new millennium offers an enhanced opportunity to reevaluate existing practices in 4-H/Youth Development work, as well as the establishment of new developmental strategies and programming initiatives to address the needs brought to the fore by changing societal trends. This process must include current stakeholders, as well as non-participants. Diversity of ideas will help us to meet the ever-changing needs of young people and expand 4-H programming opportunities.

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