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The Impact of 4-H on Leadership Life Skill Development: A College-Level Alumni  
Perspective  
Research Paper

**Abstract**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to determine the contribution of 4-H experiences to leadership life skill development of college-level 4-H alumni and to determine the effect of those skills on collegiate alumni's desire to continue involvement in 4-H. The research methods included semi-structured interviews. Major findings of the study noted that the interviewees' 4-H experiences positively contributed to leadership life skill development, closely following the pattern of the four essential elements which serve as the foundation of 4-H programming. Also

identified was a strong desire of college-level 4-H alumni to continue their participation with 4-H. Recommendations include targeting this generation of alumni specifically for a greater utilization because of their strong desire to stay connected.

### Biographical Sketch

Jessica Anderson is a graduate student at North Carolina State University in Extension Education. Her interests include livestock programming, 4-H, and youth development. She received her undergraduate degree also at North Carolina State University majoring in Animal Science. Jessica is a native of Fayette County, Pennsylvania where she was an active 4-H participant and loyal Polled Hereford cattle enthusiast. As with other college-level students, as seen in this study, Jessica continues to have a strong desire to continue involvement in the 4-H program.

Lauren Mouton is a graduate student at North Carolina State University in Extension Education. She is a native of Louisiana and a lifelong 4-H member. She received her undergraduate degree at Nicholls State University in Family and Consumer Sciences.

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6. Yes, please print this proposal in the conference proceedings, if accepted.
7. Yes, please consider the proposal for a poster if not accepted.
8. No, I am not able to serve as a reviewer.
9. No, I am not able to serve as a facilitator

# THE IMPACT OF 4-H ON LEADERSHIP LIFE SKILL DEVELOPMENT: A COLLEGE-LEVEL ALUMNI PERSPECTIVE

## Introduction

4-H has long been hailed as the premiere youth organization of the United States and is known as the most recognizable part of the Cooperative Extension Service (Radhakrishna, 2005). At 108 years old, 4-H has a long history of preparing the youth of America by developing life skills through projects and educational activities. Youth, ages 5-19, benefit greatly from the development provided through the 4-H program that extends into their adult lives (Radhakrishna, 2005). Astroth & Haynes (2002, 7) found that “4-H kids are... more likely to contribute to their community by taking on leadership roles in their school and community.”

Many studies have been conducted to determine the role of 4-H on leadership and life skill development (Meyers, 1978; Fitzpatrick, et al., 2005; Radhakrishna, 2005; Boyd, Herring, & Briers, 1992; Ladewig & Thomas, 1987; Goodwin, et al., 2005; Seevers & Dormody, 1995). These studies cumulatively conclude that 4-H members have developed critical life skills through the program including social skills, personal development, leadership, and responsibility. While there have been numerous studies undertaken to identify life skill development of members and alumni, no studies have investigated the early program alum (college students).

## Literature Review/ Theoretical Framework

Goodwin, Barnetts, Pike, Peutz, Lanting & Ward, (2005), ask the question, “Will there be a 200-year mark observed for the 4-H program in your state in 2102?,” in response to the centennial anniversary. The answer to that question lies in the ability of the 4-H program to demonstrate to citizens and elected officials the continued relevance and worth of this 100-plus-year old institution (Goodwin, et al., 2005). As a way to ensure the continuation of 4-H, it is critical to continually assess the impact of 4-H upon the leadership life skill development of its members. It is important to understand the three areas of frame for this study: 1.) the programmatic essential elements that provide the foundation for life skill development through 4-H, 2.) the prior studies of the impact of 4-H on life skill development and 3.) the uniqueness of the college student population.

### *The Essential Elements of the 4-H Program*

The foundation of 4-H programming is rooted in four essential elements: belonging, independence, mastery and generosity (4-H National Headquarters, 2009). The National 4-H Organization suggests that a sense of belonging may be the single most powerful positive ingredient programs can add to the lives of children and youth because youth need to know they are cared about and accepted by others. Through independence, youth gain valuable life skills

such as personal responsibility and discipline. Mastery invokes not only skill and knowledge acquisition but self-efficacy to take positive risks and accept challenges to focus on self-improvement. Generosity is most often used as a synonym for service; however generosity goes beyond service to include the development of personal values such as compassion and tolerance (4-H National Headquarters, 2009). These four elements provide the foundation from which all 4-H programming stems.

#### *4-H Impact Studies*

Cooperative Extension states that the 4-H program develops leadership and life skills among its members (National 4-H Council, 2003 as cited in Bruce, Boyd, & Dooley, 2005). To support this, Goodwin, et al. (2007) found that 4-H youth were more likely to demonstrate life skills than their peers (as cited in Lam & Harder, 2009). In the same vein, Meyers (1978) specifically looked at leadership skills and found that participation in the 4-H program significantly increased leadership performance in 4-H youth.

Another study focusing on leadership development through the 4-H program conducted by Seevers & Dormody (1995), found that participation in 4-H leadership activities had a positive relationship with youth leadership life skill development. They also found that most 4-H members participated in many different leadership activities. Boyd, Herring & Briers (1992) found that participation in the 4-H program positively relates to perceived leadership life skill development. As expected, the level of leadership life skill development was found to increase as the level of 4-H participation increased.

A national study performed by Ladewig & Thomas (1987) found that 4-H alumni were satisfied with 4-H's contribution to their personal development. Ladewig & Thomas also concluded that life skill development formed in 4-H carries into adulthood. Another study that looked at 4-H alumni was performed by Fitzpatrick, Gogne, Jones, Loblely, & Phelps in 2005. This study asked alumni to identify life skills gained as a result of 4-H club participation. Common themes emerged including self-esteem, teamwork, responsibility, planning/organizing, and cooperation, similar to those findings from Radhakrishna (Fitzpatrick et al., 2005). These researchers also posed the question, "Can the impacts of 4-H really be measured?" The answer, according to Fitzpatrick et al., (2005), is yes, life skills learned can be tracked through the use of project records, fair exhibits, 4-H stories, testimonials, and interviews with 4-H alumni.

Radhakrishna (2005) conducted a study with 4-H alumni to determine the contribution of 4-H experiences to leadership, personal development and communication skills. In the area of community development, including service and citizenship skills, Radhakrishna found that 4-H greatly contributed to 4-H alumni's development. Radhakrishna also found that 4-H alumni perceived that their 4-H experiences greatly contributed to developing group interaction skills, leadership and decision making skills. Finally, Radhakrishna concluded that 4-H influence them

to finish high school, job/career selection, and continuing education beyond high school (Radhakrishna, 2005). In addition, alumni also indicated that 4-H participation influenced them in preparing for future leadership role and responsibilities.

### *College Students*

When discussing the uniqueness of college aged individuals, a dichotomy emerges, reflecting their self-focused nature while retaining compassionate and considerate characteristics (Arnett, 2006). Specifically this generation has been labeled as: 1) conventionally motivated and respectful; 2) structured rule followers; 3) protected and sheltered; 4) cooperative and team-oriented; 5) talented achievers; and 6) confident and optimistic about their futures—all of which have implications for educators at all levels (Strange, 2004 as cited in Elam, Stratton & Gibson, 2007). Because this generation is typically very active, this group often searches for opportunities to stay connected to the community through service needs (Elam, Stratton & Gibson, 2007).

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2010), 30.4% of individuals between the ages of 16 and 19 years, and 19.5% of the population between the ages of 20 and 24 years engage in volunteer activities. A national survey of undergraduate college students, however, reported that two-thirds of students volunteered in community service activities (The Institute of Politics, 2002), illustrating the prominence of volunteer work within the collegiate community (Kustanowitz, 2000). However the average age of volunteers is 65+ followed closely by the 55-64 demographic (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). From these statistics, college-aged individuals engage in many service activities well into their adult lives but aren't necessarily being utilized within the 4-H program. The desire of college-aged persons to volunteer should be recognized and utilized by the 4-H program because the average age of volunteers is well above the average age of a college student.

In the area of study on the impact of 4-H on leadership life skill development, college level 4-H alumni are a population left unstudied. College level alumni bring a unique perspective to the reflection of the impact on their development because they are not far removed from the 4-H program.

Clearly, the statistics demonstrate that college aged students still have a desire to serve in their communities. As the nation's premiere youth organization, 4-H has a large group of alumni that could be utilized and recruited to continue as volunteers in the 4-H program. By assessing what programs or parts of programs alumni perceive had great influence on their development, they become great candidates for volunteers to extend the influence of 4-H to others. While this study focuses only on the 4-H program, the implications could lead to a new level of volunteer recruitment for other youth organizations as well.

## **Purpose**

There is strong evidence that youth develop leadership life skills as members of the 4-H program. However, no studies have specifically identified college-level alumni to determine their perspective of life skill development. Alumni of college age were used in this study because there is research that indicates college-aged individuals maintain a desire to perform in service opportunities. As a service opportunity, 4-H alumni were used to determine the desire to continue involvement in the 4-H program. The purpose of this study was to determine the life skill development of college-level alumni and determining if that life skill development led to a continued desire to serve the 4-H organization.

## **Methods**

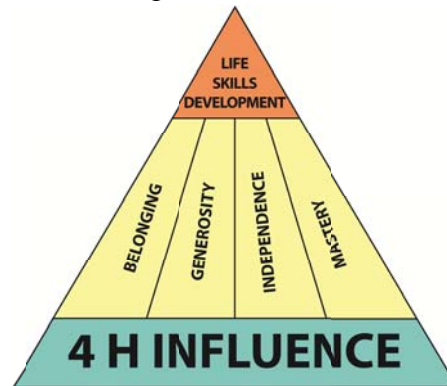
Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993) tell us that random sampling is not the preferred method when doing qualitative research because the major concern is not to generalize the findings of the study to a larger population, but to maximize discovery of the issues and nuances under study. In this case, the context being studied is early (5 or fewer years out) 4-H program alumni. The researchers used purposive sampling, intentionally seeking out these individuals because of certain qualities including: were programmatic alumni in good standing, were currently enrolled in an institution of higher education, represented a variety of states and programmatic areas and were willing to share their experiences for purposes of research. The names of participants for this study were obtained from the Advisor of the National 4-H Conference Collegiate Facilitator program. Within qualitative research, there is no concrete rule for sample size. This study focused on 13 individuals who had participated in the National 4-H Conference Collegiate Facilitator program. The sample was made up of three males and ten females, from 10 states.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted and coded to retain confidentiality. These codes are included in the results section, in parenthesis after the quotations, as part of the trustworthiness confirmability and the audit trail. Data analysis followed the traditional methods of constant comparative analysis described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) for use in naturalistic inquiry. The researchers' methodology is outlined as follows: unitization of data, categorization of units, merging categories, and journaling. Peer debriefing and member checking was done to help establish the credibility of the research. Peer debriefing occurred three times throughout the data collection and analysis process. Member checking was done with each interviewee, by allowing each to review their individual interview transcript and allowed full editorial control to ensure that the transcripts accurately reflected the content of the conversations. An audit trail and journaling were used to establish dependability and confirmability.

## Findings

The researchers found that 4-H alumni had experiences that demonstrated the four essential elements as outlined by 4-H National Headquarters. In addition 4-H influence was found to be the foundation of the acquisition of critical skills. A pictorial representation of this phenomenon can be found in Figure 1 below and is used as an outline for the findings of this study. The four essential elements remain as a model for the life skill development, however, the pictorial image more clearly defines the findings. As a reminder the codes found in parenthesis correspond to the individual or individuals who made the statements and the corresponding page number of the transcription.

Figure 1: Pictorial representation of findings.



### *4-H Influence*

Many of the college level 4-H alumni interviewed had a positive belief about the influence of 4-H on their professional and personal development. This contributes to the *4-H influence* seen at the base of the theoretical model (I1-I13).

4-H is probably one of the main reasons I am the way I am (I5. 1).

The 4-H experience showed me that agriculture wasn't all about pigs and pickles or cows and cooking. But it was about feeding the world, clothing the world, and providing the world furniture... Agriculture is ... a lifestyle for me. It is not something that is down the road from my house. It is not something that I visit once a year at a county fair. It is the person that I am and the person I want to be (I5. 3).

I think that [4-H] kind of influences the way that I behave in different situations (I13. 3).

Several of the individuals interviewed discussed how their 4-H experiences had a direct impact on their career choice (I1, I5, I6, I9, I10, I11, I12, I13).

I'm studying to be an athletic trainer or motivating others to succeed in athletics and I think that 4-H motivates you to succeed in life and that has inspired me to work with others so that they can succeed as well (I6. 2).

4-H helped me to see that event planning was something that I really wanted to involve in my career path. Without 4-H I would not have decided that was something I wanted to do. So, that clearly was life changing (I11. 3).

I'm majoring in Family Studies and Human Services. I have a minor in Animal Science and Leadership and I'd like to be an Extension Agent. Obviously 4-H had an impact on this. If I hadn't been in 4-H I wouldn't want to be an extension agent because I probably wouldn't know what they were (I1. 4-5).

### *Essential Element #1: Belonging*

Upon the base that is 4-H influence, sits the four essential elements for youth development as outlined by the 4-H National Headquarters. The first of these critical life skills is *belonging*, the development of an inclusive learning environment. Many of the 4-H alumni interviewed cited *relationships with adults, relationships with peers and networking* as having a large impact on their sense of belonging (I4, I5, I6, I7, I11).

Learning how to be part of a group, how to feel that unity, but also how to develop into where I am becoming a participant and giving something (I7. 1-2).

Friendships. Personal Relationships. Just with the adult leaders and with the youth, so many aspects of 4-H you just become a family through the stuff that you're doing (I11. 1).

Another theme that emerged that contributes to a sense of belonging was the *mentoring* of younger 4-H members (I2, I4, I9, I10, I11, I12).

It is very fulfilling to be a part of youth recognizing their abilities and their talents and being able to use those... through 4-H (I11. 2).

There was the youth in general that we reached out to without programming. So, I think that I was able to have more of a reaching experience and impact than I realized (I10. 3).

### *Essential Element #2: Independence*

*Independence*, as the acquisition of personal responsibility and discipline, was identified through the interview responses. Common themes that were identified under the heading of independence included *confidence* (I1, I2, I4, I6, I8, I10, I11, I12, I13).

A theme that emerged from the experiences of the 4-H alumni was the idea of *confidence*, specifically self-confidence and self-efficacy (I4, I7, I10, I11, I12).

Even though I have some natural confidence in the stuff that I do, I think that 4-H instilled in me a sense of confidence, knowing what I want to do and what I believe in (I11. 1).

4-H really helped me to come out of my shell, because as I got involved on that state level I was thrown into many situations where I didn't know a single person. So, that really helped me, to push me to meet people by myself and develop my interpersonal skills (I10. 1-2).

### *Essential Element #3: Mastery*

The concept of *mastery* is key in the development of life skills. Mastery includes the basic knowledge and skill acquisition that 4-H is known for through its projects and activities. Also involved in mastery is the recognition of self development and the ability to take risks and chances (I1, I4, I7, I13).

I like to learn. And so 4-H lets me do that. And it's not like school where you have to learn all about this or that. Some stuff in school you really don't want to learn. 4-H is not like that (I1. 5-6).

I think 4-H is really key in it's your choice in how much you want to learn (I13. 2).

Every alum interviewed credited 4-H to some success or accomplishment they had achieved. Many interviewees gave multiple examples of how 4-H had led them to portray the element of mastery in their lives, in and outside of 4-H (I2, I4, I5, I7, I11).

Makes you realize that anything you set your mind to, you can do. And it really just makes you feel, gives you that wonderful feeling of achievement like wow, I did this and I deserved it (I4. 2).

You see how achievable goals are when you put your mind to it and how rewarding it is when you finally get it done and when you finally see it come to fruition (I11. 3).

Another component of mastery that arose quite often in interviews was the concept of communication and speaking abilities. Many alumni contributed their communication skills solely to the 4-H program (I2, I5, I9, I11).

I speak the way I do because I was in 4-H (I5. 1).

One thing that I noticed all through high school, teachers would comment and ask me if I had been in 4-H because they could tell when I did speeches or presentations (I2. 2).

#### *Essential Element #4: Generosity*

The final essential element is *generosity*, encompassing service as well as compassion and tolerance. Many alumni cited specific service completed as well as the service that they wish to give to their local communities. Numerous participants cited their desire to give back to the organization that gave them so much (I2, I4, I7, I8, I9).

Service to the community via projects and teaching was a key part of developing life skills in alumni.

And personally I think it's helped me to be able to put other people's priorities, especially when I'm in a service situation, before mine because that's really what makes you a good leader and makes you more effective and can definitely make a bigger impact on people's lives when they see you doing that and will give them more of a reason to maybe change theirs (I9. 3).

Service to the organization was emphasized throughout the alum's interviews. Many stressed the point that they still would like to give back to 4-H, because they personally have received so much from the program (I1, I5, I7, I10, I12, I13).

I feel like 4-H doesn't stop. If something becomes part of your identity, it's hard to remove a part of your identity. I don't want to stop because there is so much that I can give back. There's so much that I can still receive from 4-H and for me to leave 4-H doesn't make that much sense. It's my life (I12. 1).

I continue to be involved in 4-H here at my university and even on the county level because 4-H gave me so much and I feel like it is my duty to give back.... Not only to benefit to myself but how I can give back to others. And if I can make an impact on somebody else's life as a friend, as a professional, then that's important to me (I5. 2).

I really do have this desire to give back and to make sure that these programs are offered to the youth of today. I know it was such a big part of my childhood and my development and so that is something I hope to give as well (I7. 2).

#### *Life Skill Development*

The pinnacle or culmination of the development of the four essential elements is life skill development as a whole, as seen through Figure 1. Many of the individuals interviewed stated that life skill development was a main asset attributed to 4-H (I4, I6, I7, I9, I12, I13).

Responsibility that it forces its members to have and accountability for your actions and knowing that when you are in the position of being a 4-H member you are a role model for others (I13. 3).

It [4-H] teaches you to be focused, organized, driven, but always know where your roots are (I5. 4).

It has taught me the importance of being proactive, not being very passive. Not just being comfortable with good, but expecting great and then pursuing it and being active in that (I7. 5).

## **Conclusions**

The desire of college level 4-H alumni to continue their experiences with 4-H was overwhelming. The 4-H influence as well as the culmination of the four essential elements into total life skill development is predominant throughout the interviews, supporting many researchers on the positive influence that 4-H has on members' leadership and life skill development. (Ladewig & Thomas 1987; Fitzpatrick et.al, 2005; Radhakrishna, 2005; SeEVERS & Dormody, 1995; Boyd, Herring & Briers, 1992).

Within this study, the researchers found that involvement in the 4-H program develops life skill development which leads to a desire to continue involvement in the 4-H program. The life skill development is in agreement with all four essential elements as outlined by 4-H National Headquarters (2009), who believes that these elements are critical for positive youth development.

Through the interviews, the researchers found that college-level alumni credit much of their leadership and life skill development to 4-H. Beginning with the 4-H influence, the base of the life skill development in the program, many of the individuals interviewed stated that the 4-H program had impacted their lives in a positive manner. The impact of the 4-H program went so far as to impact many of their careers and aspirations.

Through the essential element of belonging, many alumni believed that 4-H provided them with opportunities to build and foster relationships with peers and adults through friendships and networking. Another skill related to the sense of belonging was mentoring, including both, what they received and what they gave. Independence is another of the essential elements that emerged through the interview process. Alumni cited self-confidence as a benefit in skill development through 4-H. Mastery is a concept heavily associated with the 4-H program. The knowledge and skills acquired through projects and events is a predominant focus. However, mastery goes further, pushing members for self discovery and taking chances and risks.

Generosity also pushes the limits, extending past service projects and encouraging members in the life skills of compassion and tolerance.

College students are a unique population that can be recruited to promote the goals of 4-H. According to research, as counselors, advisors, educators, and administrators, we can nurture college student's "can-do" attitudes, civic-minded proclivities and empathic concerns in hopes they may ultimately lead to large-scale societal improvements (Elam, Stratton & Gibson, 2007). The research conducted in this study supported research on college aged students stating their need for an interconnected environment. Because the pool of college students in the study are typical of other college students in their desires to be connected, the 4-H program should take advantage of the connection with their alumni to recruit volunteers.

The combination of 4-H influence and the essential elements culminates in the total life skill development of an individual as a result of the 4-H program. From these results, 4-H college alumni continue to have a desire to be involved in service opportunities and the 4-H program.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

There is an opportunity to incorporate college-level volunteers with their desires to continue service to the organization of 4-H. By utilizing this powerful force, 4-H can ensure a new generation of volunteers to guarantee the longevity of the 4-H program to the youth of America. By targeting this specific audience at volunteer recruitment, 4-H will secure its position as the leading youth organization in America. The authors recommend this level of research be continued to assess the impact of 4-H on college-level alumni and their desires to continue their involvement with 4-H.

From this study, other youth organizations can look at their college aged alumni as a source of volunteers because of their desire to stay connected. Many other youth organizations, including but not limited to FFA, Boys and Girls Club and Scouts, can utilize this generation of alumni to capitalize on their volunteer recruitment. The college-aged generation wants to serve, youth organizations just need to provide the opportunity.

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