

Linking Research to Family and Youth Programs

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Listening to Youth Leadership

President John F. Kennedy said, “Leadership and learning are indispensable to each

other.” Given the increased emphasis on leadership development in all cooperative extension programs, it is important to know if the needs of stakeholders and the organization are being met during programming. Because leadership development programs are delivered in a variety of ways, there is no single way to assess the professional and personal growth and development of participants.

To begin to address this issue, Dr. Jacklyn A. Bruce, assistant professor in agricultural and extension education, and two extension educators conducted a mixed-methods study to collect information from youth engaged in a weekend-long state leadership development conference. Questions included an assessment of the impact of the variety and topics of sessions offered, perceived expertise of session presenters, and knowledge gain and projected use of concepts discussed in the sessions.

As might be expected, in sessions where presenters encouraged audience participation and interactivity, youth perceived a greater increase

in knowledge gain. The hands-on activities assisted youth in drawing connections between session content and real-life situations. However, youth did feel that session length played a role in their ability to engage fully in the topics presented and more time than 50 minutes was needed to develop deeper understanding.

The findings also demonstrate how important it is to pay close attention to the needs of our youth participants in order to keep them fully engaged in leadership development programming. In projecting their use of leadership concepts, several recommendations became evident that educators can use to incorporate leadership activities for youth in various programs.

“As these young people continue to grow and take on other roles in our organization, we may need to adjust the ways in which Extension presents information to fit these new stakeholders.”

- Engage youth in roles of progressively increasing

responsibility in all areas of Extension programming, not just traditional 4-H programs. Leadership skill development is en-

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Featured are a sampling of research projects conducted by the Department of Agricultural and Extension Education.



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hanced by progressively greater leadership responsibilities; i.e., club, county and beyond. This vast pool of youth talent and leadership can, and should, be utilized in all areas of Extension programming. Young people can become leaders and role models for younger audiences, peers, and adult constituents.

- **Develop programming that is hands-on and goes beyond traditional leadership experiences; think outside the box.** These youth want to be engaged in learning in interesting ways, that is thought provoking, and that shows them how to apply skills to their own unique experiences. As these young people continue to grow and take on other roles in our organization, we may need to adjust the ways in which Extension presents information to fit these new stakeholders. In recruiting program presenters the importance of interaction and hands-on activities should be stressed.
- **Maintain a lock on what topics are important and relevant to youth leadership development from a youth perspective.** One way

to involve youth is to invite them to sit on program planning and advisory committees. Research documents that older youth can be retained by providing opportunities for them to participate in leadership, decision making, and relevant service activities.



“Listening to the Youth Voice in Planning Leadership Development Programs” was published in the December 2006 *Journal of Extension*. Dr. Bruce can be reached at (814) 863-1789 or jab743@psu.edu. Sam Nicola and Tamella Menke are the 4-H extension educators who assisted with the study. The article can be read at <http://www.joe.org/joe/2006december/tt6.shtml>. ■

Intergenerational Approach to Nutrition Education

“...families reported excessive communication difficulties and requested help... to attain a healthier family diet.”

In a recent study of how youth, their parents, and grandparents discuss issues related to eating, families reported having excessive communication difficulties and requested help in finding ways to work together to attain a healthier family diet. For many of these families, the way they made decisions about food purchases and family eating practices left little room for meaningful discussion nevertheless working together to figure out how to eat more healthfully. In such cases, it was usually the parent who acted in a unilateral, “authoritarian” manner, but occasionally it was the child who dominated discussions and aggressively worked to minimize parental involvement in making food-related decisions, a pattern the researchers labeled as “authoritarian childing.”

In contrast, it was found that in families with effective communication strategies (e.g., having

frequent food-related conversations), parents effectively managed to avoid conflict in their food-related discussions and decision-making process by actively and proactively involving children in the process of meal planning, food shopping, and meal preparation.

The study, conducted by Dr. Matthew Kaplan, associate professor in agricultural and extension education, Lynn James, M.S., R.D., L.D.N., and Dr. Nancy Ellen Kiernan, program evaluator, suggests that nutrition educators can play a meaningful role in helping families to discuss, define, and achieve shared goals for eating healthfully. In this sense, there is a need for more nutrition education programs that are designed to provide children, parents, and grandparents from the same family with joint opportunities to learn about, discuss, and act upon the same nutrition and health information. The underlying theoretical framework is that family members are interdependent in their food-related behaviors, and therefore intervention

efforts should seek to involve the entire family, enhance communication, and promote cooperation in improving family eating practices.

Study results informed the development of two new intergenerational family nutrition education demonstration programs – *FRIDGE* and *Family Fitness*. Both programs, now in the piloting phase, include activities that enable family members to have non-adversarial conversations about food. All family members, including children, are viewed and treated as “partners” in joint efforts to make positive behavior changes. Findings from the *Family Fitness Program* indicate students grades 3-5 and their parents have significantly improved family meal planning and preparing meals together, healthy-eating goal setting, and agreement for eating healthy foods, increased student intake of fruits and whole grains, decreased intake of higher fat and sugar foods and drinks, and increased family and student physical activity.

The team’s research was published in the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* (2006, Vol. 38, pages 298-306) in an article entitled: “Intergenerational Family Conversations and Decision Making about Eating Healthfully.”

Information about the Family Fitness program can be obtained from Lynn James at Penn State Cooperative Extension in Northumberland County at lxj11@psu.edu or (570) 988-3950.

Information about FRIDGE (Food-Related Intergenerational Discussion Group Experiences) is available from Dr. Kaplan at msk15@psu.edu, or by phone at 814-863-7871. ■



Finding Evidence that 4-H is Influential

In 1986 a national study about the research base for Extension programs concluded that the 4-H research base was insufficient to ensure the program’s “future vitality.” Decades later in his 2001 book, *Land-Grant Universities and Extension into the Twenty-first Century*, McDowell stated, there has always been a kind of distortion regarding the intellectual investment in 4-H programs. In his words, “We always knew more about the calves and the other animals than we did about the kids” (p. 156).



Are these perceptions reality? Does the research base ensure the sustainability of 4-H? Do we know more about the animals than we do about the youth in 4-H?

The purpose of Dr. Jan Scholl’s research was to locate and document as many 4-H research studies as possible, and to test McDowell’s theory regarding the type of 4-H studies available: subject matter (sheep, pigs, cattle, foods, clothing, etc.) versus youth development and adult leadership. Dr. Scholl is an associate professor in agricultural and extension education.

Locating over 1,950 graduate and experiment station studies from over 100 colleges and universities world-wide was challenging. “4-H” is a difficult keyword to search as it appears in dozens of chemical compounds and is frequently studied in dissertations and theses. Also, in the early years 4-H was known as boys’ and girls’ clubs and by more than 20 different names in foreign countries. Then too, library cataloging systems in other countries are dramatically different.

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“We always knew more about the calves and the other animals than we did about the kids.”

Data from the studies was classified into discrete groupings by three reviewers and entered into a database for sorting by author, date, institution and key word phrase. The categories are listed at right in approximate order of the most to least number of studies found.



The results indicate subject matter studies were third in ranking

yet remained a very low percentage in the overall number of studies that were categorized. Therefore, it can be said that there is a research base for 4-H and that the studies are more comprehensive in nature than just project subject matter. In all of the studies, however, there are indications of the value. The strength of more than 1,900 studies over a century of work may be argued as powerful evidence in itself.

But is evidence enough? Factors such as who are the parties that need to be convinced of the program's value and what other priorities may be available at the time (do we give money to one group or another) might determine what type of evidence is needed for educators, legislators, and funding agencies and the format that is the most valuable.

Categories of Research Data

1. *Adolescent Needs and Educational Trends*
2. *Leadership and Leadership Development of Both Youth and Adults*
3. *Subject Matter (Ag and Home Economics Related)*
4. *Tenure of 4-H Members, 4-H Leaders, and Agents*
5. *Curriculum, Curriculum Development, and Use of Technology*
6. *Competition, Awards and Recognition*
7. *Evaluation and Perception Studies of 4-H by Administrators and the Community*
8. *Alumni Studies and Comparisons of 4-H Members and Non-Members*
9. *History and Biography Studies*
10. *Health and Recreation-Related Studies*

A complete outline of this study is available on-line and a searchable on-line database of all the studies through the end of 2006 is available at: <http://apps.libraries.psu.edu/agnic/index.cfm>. An on-line database of the state, national, and experiment station studies will be available in 2007. Dr. Scholl can be reached at (814) 863-7444 or at jscholl@psu.edu. ■

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