

## **4-H Made Me a Leader: A College-Level Alumni Perspective of Leadership Life Skill Development**

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### **Abstract**

The purposes of this qualitative study were 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 specifically targeting this generation of alumni for greater utilization because of their strong desire to stay connected.

### **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 the United States 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 and Haynes (2002) found that “4-H kids are...more likely to contribute to their community by taking on leadership roles in their school and community (p. 7).”

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). Leadership and life skill development as defined by Miller (1976) is the development skills necessary for life to perform leadership functions in daily living. 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 alumni (college students).

### **Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

Goodwin, Barnetts, Pike, Peutz, Lanting, & Ward (2005) ask will your state observe the 200-year mark of the 4-H in 2102? In response to the centennial anniversary, the answer lies in the ability of the 4-H program to demonstrate the continued relevance and worth of this 100-plus-year old institution. As a way to ensure the continuation of 4-H, it is critical to continually assess the impact of 4-H on the leadership and life skill development of its members.

It is important to understand the three areas of the framework for this study: (a) the programmatic essential elements that provide the foundation for life skill development through 4-H, (b) the prior studies of the impact of 4-H on life skill development, and (c) 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 include 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).

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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 (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. 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 and 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, and 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 and Thomas (1987) found that 4-H alumni were satisfied with 4-H's contribution to their personal development. Ladewig and 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 and organizing, and cooperation. These were similar to the findings from Radhakrishna (Fitzpatrick et al., 2005). These researchers also posed the question, "Can the impacts of 4-H really be measured?" According to Fitzpatrick et al. (2005), the answer 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 influenced them to finish high school, in their job or career selection, and whether to continue education beyond high school (Radhakrishna, 2005). In addition, alumni also indicated that 4-H participation influenced them in preparing for future a leadership role and its 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 (a) conventionally motivated and respectful, (b) structured rule followers, (c) protected and sheltered, (d) cooperative and team-oriented, (e) talented achievers, and (f) confident and optimistic about their futures. All of these characteristics have implications for educators at all levels (Howe & Strauss, 2000). 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). This data illustrates the prominence of volunteer work within the collegiate community (Kustanowitz, 2000). However the average age of volunteers nationwide is 65 plus years 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 are not 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 desires 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. No studies, however, have specifically identified college-level

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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 purposes of this study were to determine the life skill development of college-level alumni and to determine 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 (five or fewer years out) 4-H program alumni. The researchers used purposive sampling. The intention was to seek out individuals because of certain qualities including: (a) were programmatic alumni in good standing, (b) were currently enrolled in an institution of higher education, (c) represented a variety of states and programmatic areas, and (d) 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 10 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: (a) unitization of data, (b) categorization of units, (c) merging categories, and (d) 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 while allowing for 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.

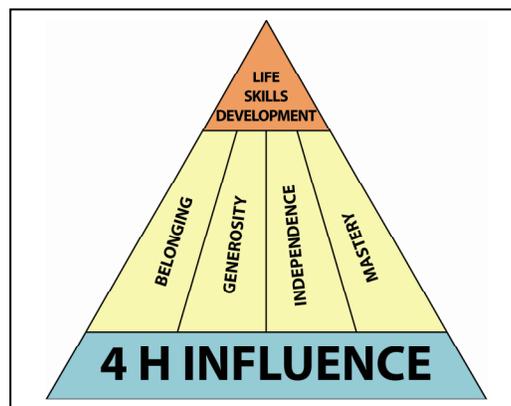
## **Findings**

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 and is used

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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, and 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, that is 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, and 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, and 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 with our 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. A common theme that was identified under the heading of independence included *confidence* (I1, I2, I4, I6, I8, I10, I11, I12, and I13).

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A theme emerged from the experiences of the 4-H alumni in the same vein as confidence: the idea of self-confidence and *self-efficacy* (I14, 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 essential 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, and 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' your choice in how much you want to learn (I13. 2).

Every alumnus 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, and 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 alumni'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**

As seen through Figure 1 the pinnacle or culmination of the development of the four essential elements is life skill development as a whole. 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) which 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 individual career choices 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 are 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. Research suggests that 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 particularly their need for an interconnected environment. Because the pool of college students in the study is 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. These results indicate 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 4-H program. By utilizing this powerful force, 4-H can ensure a new generation of volunteers to guarantee the longevity of the 4-H program for the youth of the United States of America. By targeting this specific audience as volunteer recruitment, 4-H will secure its position as the leading youth organization in this country. 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.

Recommendations for extension and leadership educators include targeting college students in their volunteer recruitment. College students still have a desire to be connected, but may not have the time to dedicate to a long-term commitment. Volunteer positions, therefore, should be made available on a more short-term basis as the programmatic need for volunteers continues to increase. This study demonstrates that college-level alumni want to continue to participate in organizations to which they feel connected, however, educators and program administrators need to not only provide the opportunities, but make students aware of their availability. Through successful volunteer recruitment and networking the increase in an enthusiastic volunteer base in a variety of community-based programs will be greatly enhanced.

From the results of this study, other youth organizations should be encouraged to mine their college-aged alumni as a source of volunteers because of the desire to stay connected. Many other youth organizations including 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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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 also received her undergraduate degree 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.

Jacklyn Bruce is an Assistant Professor at North Carolina State University in Extension Education. Her research interests include leadership skill acquisition and training environments and their effect on training transfer. Her teaching interests include youth development, leadership and management of volunteers, and collaborative leadership.

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.