

# forum

The Forum provides an outlet for readers of the Journal of Extension to express their views on any topic important to Extension work. In the Forum for this issue, we are publishing the views of Harriet P. Rosenthal and J. Conrad Glass, Jr. titled "Motivating 4-Hers: Cooperation or Competition?" We have asked a number of Extension workers around the United States to respond, in this Forum, to their views.

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*Motivating 4-Hers: Cooperation or Competition?:* 4-H programs are based, for the most part, on the premise that young people are best motivated through competition. For instance, the awards program is the very backbone of the 4-H organizational structure. Words like "incentive" have, through the years, become synonymous with "awards." Yet, in light of studies indicating that the dropout rate of senior members may be due to the competitive factor, it seems appropriate to reevaluate the idea of competition as a motivator and as the basis for major programming efforts in 4-H.

In retrospect, it's understandable that competition has become the major thrust for youth education in Extension.

Our democratic society, with its system of free enterprise, places a high premium on competition. Extension administrators and donors of 4-H awards programs are the product of and the "winners" in such a system. It seems only natural, then, to assume that youth education is best served through this system of competitive behavior. But, is it?

When research in the areas of competition and cooperation is reviewed, it becomes readily apparent that most of the major research is dated. Still, there are indications that each of these two motivators is appropriate and a useful technique given *certain conditions* and with the realization that each brings about *certain and different effects*.

Competition appears to be a more effective motivator when the task is a relatively simple one, such as substitution of digits for numbers, speed of tapping, strength of hand grip, turning of fishing reels, etc. Proponents of competition often refer to the results of Hurlock's 1927 study: the average arithmetic score of the competitive group exceeds the average arithmetic score of the control group. Yet, Hurlock herself cautions, "The type of material, as can be readily seen, required

speed and accuracy on the part of the child rather than reasoning of the problem solving variety.”<sup>1</sup>

Studies also indicate that competition brings about certain unique effects. In Hurlock’s study, the children in the competitive group who were defeated on the first day never seemed to overcome initial defeat. Additionally, there are indications that competition produces insecurity and that competition-induced frustration enhances both imitative and total aggression in children. Certainly, these aren’t goals of 4-H.

Studies by Deutsch as well as Hammond and Goldman reveal that in cooperative groups qualitative productivity is significantly higher than in competitive groups.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, supporting research suggests that cooperation creates: (1) positive and supportive relationships among learners; (2) high degrees of cohesiveness, involvement, and participation within the group; (3) improved decision-making and problem-solving behavior; and (4) willingness by members to take higher risks in their goal setting. These results are more in line with the goals and philosophy of 4-H.

Given these findings, the expanded target population of 4-H, and the attrition rate of senior members, it seems most appropriate to question the competitive base of 4-H. Are awards having positive or negative effects on 4-Hers?

Two concerns become apparent. First, under what conditions is competition/cooperation a more effective motivator of behavior? This has yet to be answered satisfactorily, although research seems to indicate that competitive behavior is most appropriate when the task to be learned is a relatively simple one. But, how many tasks in 4-H are simple ones?

Second, do all segments of the youth population respond equally to the same motivator? It seems highly unlikely that the response patterns to competition and cooperation would be the same for the rural and the urban, for the advantaged and the disadvantaged, for the minority and the majority cultural groups.

Extrinsic awards command a great deal of importance in 4-H. Yet, some evidence suggests that they may bring results counter to the aims of 4-H. Efforts must be made to determine what effects awards really have on 4-H youth. Such answers are needed if 4-H programming is to be aimed at effectively reaching youth.

## Footnotes

1. Elizabeth B. Hurlock, “The Use of Group Rivalry as an Incentive,” *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, XXII (1927), 181.
2. Morton Deutsch, “An Experimental Study of the Effects of Cooperation and Competition Upon Group Process,” *Human Relations*, II (1949), 199-231; Leo Keith Hammond and Morton Goldman, “Competition and Noncompetition and Its Relationship to Individual and Group Productivity,” *Sociometry*, XXIV (1961), 46-60.

**Kathryn R. Treat**  
Extension Specialist,  
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If Glass and Rosenthal sought to gain the reader's attention in their first two paragraphs, they certainly did! The immediate reaction is defensive. Attack 4-H awards and competition—it's almost akin to attacking motherhood or apple pie.

Competitive events and awards are highly visible and the substance from which news stories develop. However, what about the hundreds of youth involved in 4-H programs such as, Teens Learning about Children, or an Arts-In? Where's the competition and what are the awards in learning about and caring for young children, exploring art media in workshops of expression, community service projects, or sharing a talent with the elderly? 4-H programs aren't solely based on competition nor is competition the major thrust of youth education in Extension.

The original boys' and girls' club movement began in the form of contests, and the purpose of prizes as cited by Knapp and Martin in 1910 was to arouse interest and keep up enthusiasm. Competition became an educational method by which youth learned standards of quality and how to improve agricultural and home economics methods.

However, not only have the purposes and programs of 4-H reflected an adaptability to social change and contemporary social needs, but the nature of competition has changed. Competition takes many forms in 4-H. It's impossible to deal with generalities about competition, or to transpose research that's been done with college students and/or young children to the 4-H age group.

I concur with the essence of their views and that is, as a first step in evaluating awards and competition in 4-H, there's a priority need for research on the motivating forces of cooperation/competition and their effects on youth. Only then can we begin to *objectively* discuss the 4-H awards and competition structure and identify the alternatives that will maximize educational experiences that contribute to the growth and development of young people.

**Ronald F. Aronson**  
Assistant Director,  
4-H and Agriculture,  
University of  
Connecticut—Storrs

I readily agree with the authors that competition in many 4-H situations is an ineffective motivational tool and may have negative effects. However, I disagree with the assumption that 4-H programs for the most part are based on competition. It's my belief that, in many states, awards aren't the "backbone" of the 4-H organizational structure, but only one of the many parts of the program.

The "backbone" of 4-H is self-development through a variety of educational experiences with recognition for achievement provided from parents, friends, and the com-

munity. Recognition is positive reinforcement of self-worth and isn't synonymous with competition. Recognition may result from a competitive situation, or from a cooperative program, or from an activity with achievement measured against a standard where any or all may be recognized for reaching their goals.

The article does challenge us to review our programs to determine if competitive, and noncompetitive methods are in a desirable balance so that all 4-H participants have a choice of activities where they may be recognized for achievement in a positive manner.

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National 4-H Foundation  
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If Rosenthal and Glass are intent on improving 4-H programming and its effectiveness in reaching youth, their efforts fall short on two counts. They make some erroneous assumptions about 4-H in 1976, and they've asked the wrong question about motivating 4-Hers.

It seems clear that the question of competition versus cooperation produces plenty of heat but little light. A review of current knowledge would indicate that questions of how much, what kind, under what circumstances, with what individuals for *both* competition *and* cooperation are more productive questions to consider. Cooperation and competition can no longer be considered as opposite ends of a continuum if one wants helpful answers to improve programming with youth.

I would be more comfortable in reviewing these views if the authors gave an indication of an adequate knowledge of current 4-H practices nationwide and perhaps could approach the problem by attempting to find out what causes the demonstrated success of 4-H. To be helpful in the future, we need to know more of what the basis for the success of 4-H is and then perform more of that kind of behavior. This just might move the program further and faster than to search for failures and dwell on the negatives.

For those interested in motivating 4-Hers, I'd recommend that rather than getting too excited about this article, they study the material in the soon-to-be released program in the staff development and training project on incentives and awards.

**Brevoort C. Conover**  
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Rutgers University,  
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This article has many, many problems with it. Perhaps the authors, Rosenthal and Glass, want to play the devil's advocate and raise some "hackles" which I'm sure will happen.

The opening statements are completely counter to my philosophy as an educator. The 4-H program is based on "youth development" and not on the competition factors as stated.

And, making a statement that awards are the "backbone" of our program—hogwash!

Yes, I'll be quick to admit that many of the programs do groom kids for awards that give all of us a black eye, but to generalize in the manner stated is dead wrong. Horse shows, dairy and beef cattle shows, etc., certainly have done much to promote the "awards syndrome." The newspapers play up the grand champion.

We all recognize the difficulty in measuring the growth of an individual who may have been a shy, retiring kid, but now stands on his feet and gives an illustrated talk after a couple of years of 4-H.

Yes, we do have a large dropout of senior members, but I question that competition is the major factor. High school activities, sports, and changing attitudes are the dominant factors from where I sit.

I've long felt that the National 4-H Service Committee that is "awards oriented" could do something more constructive with the huge dollar support they get from General Motors, General Foods, Ford, and on and on, than feed and entertain 1,500 kids at National 4-H Congress.

**Eugene Williams**  
*Assistant Director  
of Extension, 4-H  
and Special Projects,  
Oklahoma State  
University—Stillwater*

I guess my first reaction is that I disagree with the statement that "4-H programs are based, for the most part, on the premise that young people are best motivated through competition." It's my feeling that many of us associated with evaluating the 4-H program have overemphasized the number of winners or the opportunity for trips and awards in a program area as contrasted to the educational value of participation.

Competition is a way of life for many of us and it's truly a part of each day's activities, but the incentives and awards may not be as important to the participants as to the onlookers. I think this has been brought to my attention as I visit with former 4-Hers and they talk about the true values of 4-H. To them, the opportunity to participate, to cooperate, and to gain in knowledge and understanding was the real thing.

I'm a firm believer that we should spend more time in studying the effective use of incentives and awards rather than debating the point—are they good or bad?

**Kenneth E. Dawson**  
*Director, 4-H  
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University—Blacksburg*

Competition doesn't necessarily preclude nor eliminate cooperation. Admittedly, competition in 4-H is perhaps the single most frequently used mechanism for getting youngsters involved in this educational program. Competition often is keen and many youngsters go all out to win. Yet, who has seen better cooperators among youth today than can be found in 4-H? We should remind ourselves, too, that competition isn't required to be a good 4-Her.

My challenge to Rosenthal and Glass and to other educators for whom I have much respect is to update our research so we may better know the extent and circumstances in which

the competition may be introduced into the 4-H program. It's an indictment of the profession that we must turn to 1927 vintage studies for our best information. They're to be commended for challenging the 4-H profession to take a critical look at itself.

**Edward Frickey**  
*Extension Specialist,  
4-H and Youth  
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The use of cooperation and competition in the 4-H program has been well stated by the authors. The references to studies on competition, while somewhat limited, indicate some trends that need to be exposed to additional review. These studies need to be directed to the relationship between competition and learning, motivation, tenure, human development and personal growth. Support for this research should be available from Extension sources.

The real problem, as usual, involves the practical use of the research in bringing change to current practices. The wise use of cooperation will need to be gradual but firm. Professional and volunteer development programs will be needed at every level of the 4-H program. Difficult decisions on Extension policy will need to be exercised throughout the system. These alternatives should reach down to the 4-H Club level where group process can result in individual fulfillment.

Additional learning experiences will emerge as cooperation and competition are placed in their proper perspective. 4-H members will find satisfaction in working together on such activities as community improvement, work with the elderly, integration with the disadvantaged, and other group endeavors. Awards for this kind of activity will result in learning the cooperative spirit inherent in the very name of the Cooperative Extension Service.

**Bill Costin**  
*Volunteer 4-H Leader,  
Warsaw, North Carolina*

After working with youth for 14 years as a 4-H leader and with children of my own, I feel that we must first realize that there's a difference in every individual and what motivates one may not be the other, or what one likes or dislikes the other may not.

Competition is good and it brings out the best in us. A very good example is our nation with the highest standard of living in any country in the world. Awards are many things; blue ribbons, trips, a pat on the back, or a pay check and self-satisfaction. These are the things that bring out the incentive for accomplishment and success. The 4-H program with its many activities and projects provides areas of cooperation and areas of competition and is tailored to the needs of every youth regardless of his or her background. We must realize that we can't develop a program that will make every youth a doctor or lawyer or even reach their greatest potential. It hasn't been done in the last thousand years. Personally, I don't think Glass and Rosenthal's views are pertinent, but do give you something to think about.

I feel a real concern and a pertinent point today is needed training aides for leaders and teachers in recognizing the difference in all individuals and what it takes to motivate each individual. Incentives are the key to achievement, regardless of what they are. Our number one problem is poor training of leaders and teachers, and this must be corrected if we're to ever reach the maximum potential of each individual. As a volunteer 4-H leader, I would spend my time on something more useful if there were any less of an awards program in 4-H.

*Rosenthal & Glass Respond to the Responses:*

Yes, the mission of 4-H IS youth development, but what is the primary vehicle used to achieve this mission? To a great extent, it's competition. Programming in 4-H is often constructed with competition as the principal motivator of behavior. While it's true that some states have developed multi-modes of program delivery, taking into account varied motivational sets, many states continue to use primarily the awards system as the principal mode of programming and motivation. It's in this respect that the awards program is viewed by the authors as the backbone of the 4-H organizational structure.

It was suggested by one reviewer to investigate the causation of demonstrated success in 4-H and then perform more of this successful behavior. This would be a sound research approach, but it certainly would be amiss to eliminate research investigating the other side of the coin.

If 4-H just looks at its successes, it's likely that it will continue to repeat the same mistakes, and it will continue to do those things that motivate certain youth. Yet, it will continue to bypass those youth for whom such an approach doesn't speak. It's true that 4-H has benefits for the "winners," but what effect does it have on the "losers"—the perennial Charlie Brown? As another reviewer stated, ". . . what motivates one may not be the other . . ." It's to this "other" that we speak.

The intent of the article is self-examination. It's not intended to discredit the competitive mode of behavior, for competition certainly has helped thousands of 4-Hers in their growth and development. Rather, it's suggested that other motivators of behavior might also be appropriate. If this be judged reasonable, then, research is needed to investigate: (1) under what conditions are competition/cooperation more effective motivators of behavior and (2) do all segments of the youth population respond equally to the same motivator?