

4-H winners: what do we know about them?

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What is the profile of a 4-H contest winner? How would one describe the achievers? What draws them to 4-H, and what concerns do they have about the 4-H program and life in general? These are just a few of the questions that guided our research in a survey of 110 4-H winners who had gathered from throughout Utah to participate in a statewide competition. A questionnaire asking about family life, friendships, amount of involvement by family members in 4-H, the perceived image of the community and of peer groups about 4-H, and other related items was given to the contestants.

Although many of their answers were what we expected, others were surprising and have made us look more critically at our program. Here's what we found from this study.

Gender and Home Background

Of a total of 110 state contest winners surveyed, 85 were female and 25 male. These young people ranged in age from 14 to 19 years. The average age was 15. A total of 92% came from homes whose parents were currently married and living together. The occupation of the fathers indicated that the majority of the adolescents came from a skilled or semi-skilled occupational class—blue-collar homes. Less than 25% were from professional and managerial class backgrounds. Almost 55% came from homes where the mother wasn't employed outside the home.

The demographic profile of Utah's winners is in some ways different from what Dennis and Hurt¹ report as the profile

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of the average 4-Her. Not only is there a higher percentage of females (70% of winners were female vs. national average of 4-H females 56%), but more of the Utah winners appear to come from lower-class homes than does the average 4-Her.

Club Membership and Close Friendship

When asked about the number of non-4-H youth clubs to which the youths belonged, nearly 6 out of every 10 reported holding memberships in 2 or more clubs. When they were asked about the "number of real close friends they had in 4-H," 34% said none, 43% indicated 1 or 2, while only 23% remarked that they had 3 or more "real close friends" involved in 4-H Club work.

These levels are contrasted with the "number of real close friends they have in all contacts of life." Using this comparative basis, only 8% listed having no friends, 13% having 1 or 2 close friends, leaving 79% with 3 or more close friends. These figures raise an interesting question as to why almost 33% of the 4-H youths surveyed indicated no "real close friends in 4-H." This lack of choosing friends in 4-H is especially perplexing in light of research reported by Yankelovich² showing that most adolescents choose friends who are like themselves and have similar interests.

We speculate that other groups appear to have a stronger mechanism for friendship formation than found in Utah 4-H Clubs. However, the scope of our data doesn't directly address that issue. Thus, speculations remain open to debate.

. . . this sample isn't representative of the average 4-H youth in Utah or elsewhere, but the results nevertheless raise important questions and concerns that we as Extension workers must take into consideration as we plan and develop programs in the area of youth development and 4-H work.

Motivations and Length of Involvement

The 6 top ranked reasons expressed by respondents for joining 4-H listed *parents being a leader* first, followed by *encouragement by friends*, *personal enrichment*, *horse projects*, *livestock shows*, and *because the whole family was involved*.

These reasons for joining 4-H are contrasted by the reasons they gave for staying involved in 4-H. Here the respondents listed *meeting and associating with neat people* as the most important reason for staying with 4-H. A very surprising finding was that 31% said they'd be willing to stay on as a 4-H Club leader until age 18 with another 52% indicating they'd stay involved until well beyond their 18th birthday.

Family Involvement

The vast majority indicated they had other family members who were involved in 4-H (92%). But when asked to specify who was involved, it was brother and sister who showed the most involvement (61%), followed by just brother (18%), just sister (17%), and mother (4%). Not one of the sample listed the father as being involved. These findings raise some interesting questions about why there's apparently little or no paternal involvement in projects, particularly those associated with livestock and horses. Our question on family involvement may have lacked clarity with some of the respondents assuming "involvement" meant nothing other than being a leader or a member.

Perceptions of Leaders and Program

The youth in the sample, for the most part, reported a positive image of their volunteer leaders, with the majority (70%) rating them as very effective. About one-fourth (26%) characterized their leaders as somewhat effective, while only 4% said they weren't effective at all. The reader must remember that this feedback is from statewide 4-H winners, and may or may not reflect the opinions of the average 4-H Club member. Nevertheless, as a whole, respondents rated the leaders as being very effective.

Although the image of leaders is high, the winners didn't feel that their non-4-H classmates viewed 4-H programs very positively. They reported that only about 8% of their classmates would give 4-H activities a high rating. Several studies have shown that adolescents have a high need to feel wanted and accepted by their peers. These results may indicate a need for more education and better public relations with non-4-H youth.

Along this line, given 80% of the youth said their parents had a high regard for the program, it would be interesting, for comparative purposes, to ask parents of non-4-H youth about their image of 4-H.

Finally, when answering how the youths thought 4-H was being viewed by the community, the respondents indicated that most would only view 4-H as an average quality program. This finding raises another question: Does the community view 4-H as mediocre as the youths assume or is the image an internal misconception projected by these young people?

Personal Concerns and Goals

A variety of answers was given to one open-ended question: "What are your biggest concerns in life?" Half of the youth (50%) were primarily concerned with "*pleasure and enjoyment*," which included recreation, fun, or enjoyable ways to spend their time. "*Career choice*" (18%) was the second most often

mentioned area of concern. Other concerns less frequently mentioned were: *dating, money, automobiles, work experience.*

The winners were also asked this open-ended question: "What are your most important goals in life?" *Leisure and enjoyment* (34%) was mentioned by a third. About the same number considered a happy marriage their primary goal. This latter finding, however, may be partly due to the local cultural emphasis on marriage and family life. The high proportion of females in the group may have also influenced this answer. *College and career* was also ranked high as an important goal by about one-third of the respondents.

When asked what they'd like added to 4-H programs, 25% said they'd like more social, cross-club activities. About 25% wanted more guidance from their leaders, and about 50% were reportedly satisfied with the program as it currently stands.

Implications

In reviewing the literature for this research, it was evident that very little published research data are available concerning the questions asked in our survey. While information is available on Extension program development, few comparative data on program evaluation are available. We are, therefore, limited to an examination of our data and can only minimally compare our results with other states, regions, or times of measurement.

Within the context of these limitations, we share the following observations about Extension 4-H youth as related to our research:

1. Are we attracting youth who really need 4-H programs? Our data indicates that 6 out of 10 of the youth involved in this sample were quite heavily involved in non-4-H activities. Are they the ones who can benefit most from 4-H?
2. Why do one-third of those in this sample indicate no close friends in 4-H? If 4-H is a gregarious, social organization, and only 8% of this sample indicated they have no close friends either in or out of 4-H, why are a third selecting as their "real close friends" those outside 4-H?
3. The drawing and holding power of 4-H also raises some concerns. From the data, parental encouragement seems to be the most potent reason for joining. But when asked about family involvement, it was brothers and sisters who were more frequently involved, mothers showing some limited involvement, but father was

seen basically as uninvolved. Apparently once a 4-H program "wins" a member of a family, we do have fairly good holding power within that family. But it does look as though we need to do a better job of selling the concept of 4-H to both parents, and particularly to fathers.

4. The perceived image of 4-H youth by peers and community members raises serious concerns. We routinely assume that those individuals involved in 4-H regard the organization as a worthwhile one. But apparently youth and adults not involved in 4-H are perceived as having strong unfavorable evaluations toward the potential of 4-H. We're doing a good job of selling the 4-H concept to ourselves, but perhaps not doing nearly as good a job with non-4-H members.
5. The concerns and goals of 4-H respondents show a strong desire for pleasure and enjoyment. Is that a primary goal of 4-H? Is this perspective part of the 4-H pledge—pledging your head, your heart, your hands, and your health to the service of mankind? Another interesting question is: Do we need to develop programs and encourage youth to participate in 4-H activities that aren't currently on their list of concerns or goals, with the idea in mind this guided focus will help them meet their needs for the future?

These data suggest a need for more 4-H evaluation research. The awareness of the need for more research in Utah has certainly been heightened by the rather sparse availability of quality evaluative research data. We realize, of course, that this sample isn't representative of the average 4-H youth in Utah, or elsewhere, but the results nevertheless raise important questions and concerns that we as Extension workers must take into consideration as we plan and develop programs in the area of youth development and 4-H work.

Footnotes

1. Deborah Ellis Dennis and Maure Hurt, Jr., *Youth in America: A Social Indicator Chartbook on the 4-H Eligible Program* (Washington, D.C.: George Washington University, Social Research Group, 1979).
2. Daniel Yankelovich, *The New Morality: A Profile of American Youth in the 70's* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974).