

**Investigating How Participants Attribute Their Acquisition of Targeted Life Skills to 4-H Residential Summer Programs**

Alayna Naro  
Graduate Assistant  
School of Human Sciences  
Mississippi State University  
P.O. Box 9745  
Mississippi State, Mississippi 39762  
(662) 325-4597  
acn77@msstate.edu

Laura L. Greenhaw  
Assistant Professor  
School of Human Sciences  
Mississippi State University  
P.O. Box 9745  
Mississippi State, Mississippi 39762  
(662) 325-1804  
laura.l.greenhaw@msstate.edu

Carley C. Morrison  
Graduate Assistant  
School of Human Sciences  
Mississippi State University  
P.O. Box 9745  
Mississippi State, Mississippi 39762  
(662) 325-5851  
cpc215@msstate.edu

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### Introduction

It is at the forefront of discussion that youth are not developing the set of skills necessary to succeed in a 21st century work force. Present-day employers are searching for employees who possess self-motivation, effective communication, learning agility, self-awareness, effective communication, multicultural awareness, and adaptability (Van Velsor & Wright, 2012). In response, youth development professionals create programs structured around helping youth become proficient in life skills. These particular skills enable youth to make decisions and solve problems, set goals, improve communication and social skills, accept differences in others, give back to the community, make healthy lifestyle choices, encourage teamwork, and improve one's character (Norman & Jordan, 2006). Research Priority 3 of the *American Association for Agricultural Education National Research Agenda for 2016-2020* recognizes that "we must build our research programs in these areas to close the gap of workforce preparedness" (Stripling & Ricketts, 2016, p. 31).

### Conceptual Framework

The Targeting Life Skills Model (Hendricks, 1996) assists youth development professionals in advancing youth towards their fullest potential. Life skills are "abilities individuals can learn that will help them to be successful in living a productive and satisfying life" (Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, n.d., para. 3). The model was created as a means to help guide planning, implementation, and evaluation of 4-H programs (Garton et al., 2007). The model contains 35 life skills that can be used as a way to improve the experiences of youth by focusing on achieving specific, measurable goals. Though mastering any number of the 35 life skills takes repetition, the benefits of utilizing the Targeting Life Skills Model as a way to expose youth to various skills far outweigh the costs (Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, n.d.).

### Methodology

The purpose of this study was to investigate how youth participants attributed their acquisition of targeted life skills to the residential 4-H summer program they attended. Two focus groups were utilized and were differentiated based on their setting. The first comparison group ( $n = 10$ ) consisted of participants whose program took place in a traditional summer camp setting, while the second comparison group ( $n = 6$ ) consisted of participants whose program took place on campus at Mississippi State University. The group sizes directly align with Morgan's suggestion of focus groups being between six and ten participants in order to stimulate meaningful discussion without participants competing for speaking time (Morgan, 1998).

Youth program participants were asked a series of ten questions which enabled them to reflect on their experiences that occurred throughout the duration of their program. The number of questions aligns with Morgan's recommendation of eight to twelve questions for the group size that was utilized (Morgan, 1998). Further, the questions were peer reviewed by individuals who had expertise in youth development programs, 4-H common measures, and conducting qualitative research with youth participants.

Transcript-based analysis was utilized (Krueger, 1998). Focus groups were transcribed verbatim from an audio recording and were accompanied by notes taken during the process. Once the groups were transcribed, responses were critically analyzed and coded in order to identify emerging themes. Further, trustworthiness was ensured through an audit trail, maximum variation, rich descriptions, and triangulation (Merriam, 2002).

### **Findings/Conclusions**

Four themes emerged in the focus group from those participants who attended a residential 4-H summer program within the naturalistic environment:

1. Making Friends and Accepting Others
2. Satisfaction of Hands-On Learning Activities
3. Challenges of Group Living
4. Mixed Perceptions of the Naturalistic Environment

The first three themes can be directly related to the Targeting Life Skills Model (Hendricks, 1996). Though the fourth provides valuable insight, it does not fit within the model. Theme one aligns with the life skills of nurturing relationships and accepting differences. Theme two can be seen in the life skill of learning to learn. Finally, theme three can be seen in the life skill of cooperation.

In regards to the second focus group, where participants attended a residential 4-H summer program that took place on campus at Mississippi State University, five themes were revealed:

1. Developing Social Skills and Making Friends
2. Teamwork and Respecting Others
3. Leadership: Who, What, When, Where, and How
4. Overcoming Personal Barriers and Accepting Self
5. Promoting 4-H Through Local County Outreach

Utilizing the Targeting Life Skills Model (Hendricks, 1996), the first four themes can be directly associated with identified life skills. However, while the fifth theme was enlightening, it does not fit within the model. Theme one aligns with the life skills of social skills and nurturing relationships. Theme two can be seen in the life skills of teamwork and character. Theme three can be seen in the life skill of leadership. Finally, the fourth theme four can be seen in the life skill of self-esteem.

### **Recommendations**

Youth who attended a residential program in a traditional camp setting developed different life skills than those who participated in an on-campus program. However, both program types provided meaningful experiences that helped youth to mature in an all-encompassing way. Due to the differences in life skill development, it is recommended that these programs be used as building-blocks for one another. For example, as youth strengthen and develop the life skills of nurturing relationships, accepting differences, and cooperation they can be further exposed to the life skills of social skills, teamwork, character, leadership, and self-esteem.

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