Innovative Idea Poster

Assessing the Direction of 4-H Agricultural Projects through Structured Stakeholder Input

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Introduction & Need

In 1912, the 4-H program was created to build positive youth development capacity and as a tool to share agricultural advancements with youth through after-school programs, projects, clubs and camps (Seevers & Graham, 2012).The founding principles of the 4-H Youth Development Program were centered on advancing farming communities. Of the nearly six million current 4-H youth participants, roughly 2.6 million are from rural communities (National 4-H, 2018).

However, there is an identified need for a more diverse science literate workforce to be trained for new high skill jobs in agriculture and educate others about social and scientific issues (National 4-H, 2018). A shift to new or innovative, non-traditional curriculum challenges how traditional agricultural has been defined (Henry, Talbert, & Morris, 2014). The interpretation of the term *traditional 4-H agriculture* has expanded in recent years to include Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) concepts. 4-H now encompasses three priority initiatives- Science, Citizenship, and Healthy Living- to help prepare the next generation to explore the many sides of agriculture.

While extension agents lead the overall 4-H program, they rely on volunteers to work directly with youth to carry out the organizational mission. Arnold, Dolec, and Rennekamp (2009) stated, "There is growing evidence that 4-H educators spend more and more of their time as volunteer managers and less time in actual program delivery" (p. 1). Therefore, the success of 4-H programs is heavily dependent upon the volunteers that serve in various supporting roles, including advisory board and committee members. Given the importance of volunteers in educating youth, it is critical to assess their input on the direction of 4-H programs for continual growth and improvement (Ekins, 2018).

Methodology

The purpose of this project was to assess stakeholder input on the direction of 4-H agricultural projects and gather innovative ideas to help Gallatin County volunteers better teach and lead youth. Using the nominal group needs assessment technique, data was gathered from three agricultural advisory groups in Gallatin County, Montana - the Unlimited Leaders Council, Market Livestock Committee, and Horse Committee. These groups were chosen due to our objective of prioritizing traditional agricultural 4-H projects. Each advisory group holds individual meetings to discuss matters specific to their project area including by-laws, curriculum, and record-keeping. A total of 30 members provided input for this project. After a brief introduction to the project, advisory groups were given the following questions: (1) What are some innovative agricultural projects 4-H youth are involved in?, (2) What are some unique teaching ideas you have used in 4-H agricultural projects?, (3) What are some unique funding opportunities your 4-H youth have pursued?, and (4) What are some innovative ways you have extended the 4-H youth agricultural curriculum?

In utilizing the nominal group technique, participants were able to remain anonymous in their answers, therefore allowing everyone an equal opportunity to share ideas. Each question was posted on a flip chart placed around the room and participants were given five minutes to add their contributions. Data was analyzed for common themes as a means to prioritize across groups. A guided discussion followed to clarify and expand on the ideas. This phase was a major

benefit of this technique because it allowed each group to communicate ideas they may not have considered or expand on other ideas.

Results to Date

The following chart depicts examples of feedback received from the three advisory groups. Each box corresponds to questions asked during data collection. Stakeholders were able to draw on personal experience, reference to past programs, and include ideas that have not yet been implemented in Gallatin County 4-H agricultural projects.

Innovative Ag Projects	Innovative Teaching Ideas
• All groups reported growth of both urban and 'pet' projects to encourage non-traditional members to participate in 4-H • Examining urban and rural integration project opportunities • Face-to face and online certification programs such as AQA or therapeutic riding • Combining club efforts on projects • Mentoring and independent studies	• To support retention, senior members lead workshops and are encouraged to practice "knowledge before doing" • Advancing market projects to new levels • Integrate different levels of knowledge into one clinic to include all members • Monthly community tours, and events • Parent round robin and judging swaps
Unique Funding Sources	**Extending Curriculum**
• Groups offer slideshow presentation on benefits of 4-H to sponsors by appointment • Silent auction of goods from indoor fair projects • Parents Night Out events • Create shopping registry for donors to support projects • Gain sponsorship through YouTube tutorials	• Explore new leadership opportunities • Integrate local culture and heritage • Allow opportunities for county-wide involvement for planning and developing events & ideas • Emphasize life skills for project integration • Connect project books with realistic role play scenarios and experiences

Future Plans

Information gathered from this project will be used to educate volunteers and stakeholders on innovative ideas to extend traditional 4-H agricultural curriculum. Data was used to create a volunteer toolkit with new ideas for leading agricultural projects using current resources, teaching methods, and funding opportunities. The information will also be shared with all councils to improve connections across agricultural project areas. The Rapid Needs Assessment and Response Technique (Comito, Haub, & Licht, 2018) will be used in the future to further increase collaboration between groups at local, state, and regional levels. Finally, this information will be used to promote and recruit 4-H to new and expanding youth audiences.

Costs/Resources Needed

Educated facilitators were needed to conduct the nominal group technique, guide discussion and collect and analyze data. Flip charts, sticky notes, and copies of the life skills wheel were used. Time to attend meetings, collect and analyze data were the largest costs. Finally, a relationship with the 4-H agent was imperative to schedule time within each meeting for the data collection.

References

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