

**Determining the Professional Competencies of 4-H Extension Agents using the Access,
Equity, and Opportunity PRKC**

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Introduction / Need for Research

The 4-H program was founded over 100 years ago and is the largest youth development organization in the United States, seeking to enrich the lives of youth through positive youth development (National 4-H Council, 2020). The 4-H program aims to provide opportunities for all youth to thrive, and creating an atmosphere of inclusion is critical to the 4-H mission. Allowing youth from diverse backgrounds to work together builds life skills such as respect and empathy (Open Society Foundations, 2019). Historically, 4-H has struggled to connect with diverse audiences, as demographics of 4-H youth have not reflected those of the United States (LaVergne, 2013). 4-H Extension professionals lead the volunteer-delivered program (M. Gutter, personal communication, March 5, 2020), and must be competent to provide educational programs to all youth within their local communities. It is critically important to ensure 4-H professionals are trained and competent in working with diverse audiences as the 4-H mission mandates.

Conceptual Framework

The 4-H Professional Research, Knowledge and Competencies (PRKC) is a professional development framework that can be used to identify competency gaps and training needs of 4-H Extension professionals (National 4-H Headquarters, 2017). The 4-H PRKC has been used previously in California (Heck et al., 2009) and the western 4-H region (Varrella et al., 2016) to guide professional development efforts of 4-H Extension professionals. The PRKC consists of six competency domains: (a) youth development, (b) youth program development, (c) volunteerism, (d) equity, access, and opportunity, (e) partnerships, and (f) organizational systems. For our study, we chose the 4-H PRKC domain of equity, access, and opportunity, which consists of 74 competencies.

Purpose & Objectives

The purpose of the study was to assess the professional development needs of National Association of Extension 4-H Association (NAE4-HA) members using the access, equity, and opportunity 4-H PRKC. The study's objectives were to (a) describe NAE4-HA members' perceptions of their ability levels and importance of access, equity, and opportunity competencies, and (b) compare ability and importance level for each access, equity, and opportunity competency to determine priority-training needs for NAE4-HA members. This study aligns with priority three of the 2016-2020 National Research Agenda – Sufficient Scientific and Professional Workforce which Addresses the Challenges of the 21st Century (Roberts et al., 2016).

Methods

We used quantitative methodology to satisfy the objectives of our study. At the time of our study there were 3,316 NAE4-HA members. We used a systematic sampling procedure to decrease

survey fatigue of NAE4-HA membership (Dillman, 2009), as our study is part of a larger professional development assessment. We separated NAE4-HA members into two distinct groups of 1,658 members each, and we assigned one group to our study, yielding a total response rate of 25%. We used the Borich model design, which is commonly used to assess competencies and professional development needs (Hall & Broyles, 2016; Harder & Narine, 2019), to assess the volunteerism competencies of NAE4-HA members. We used an online survey and asked participants to rate their perceived ability levels and their perceived importance of each volunteerism competency statement using a five-point Likert scale. The Cronbach's alpha for the 74 items assessing volunteerism competencies was 0.86, which indicated acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach, 1951). We calculated a mean weighted discrepancy score (MWDS) (Borich 1980) to identify the difference between how important a respondent believed a competency to be and how able the respondent perceived him/herself to be at performing that competency.

Results

Results indicated the professional development needs of highest priority are “Actively recruits, supports and retains volunteers, advisory members, and partners who reflect the diversity of the community” (MWDS = 4.76), “Engages local, diverse, community-based individuals in advisory committees, volunteer opportunities, etc.” (MWDS = 4.57), “Engages the community in designing the learning opportunities” (MWDS = 4.34), “Collaborates with diverse communities/individuals to assess their needs” (MWDS = 4.27), and “Gains sufficient, meaningful input from diverse communities/individuals to design programs” (MWDS = 4.24). The professional development competencies with the lowest priority are “Demonstrates awareness of one's own cultural beliefs and practices” (MWDS = 0.72), “Understands one's own cultural heritage and acknowledges how it affects their values and assumptions” (MWDS = 1.29), and “Seeks new knowledge regarding cultural beliefs and practices” (MWDS = 1.81). There were no negative MWDS.

Conclusions, Implications, & Recommendations

Extension professionals must be competent and have strong technical subject-matter expertise in their specific programmatic area (Harder & Narine, 2019). The results of this study created a priority ranking for competencies most needed for NAE4-HA members regarding the equity, access, and opportunity 4-H PRKC. Unfortunately, the results of this study are not comparable to other published studies, as Heck et al. (2009) did not provide a priority ranking of needed competencies, and Varrella et al. (2016) used only five of the 4-H PRKC omitted the equity, access, and opportunity PRKC in their research. NAE4-HA can use the results of this study to create targeted and intentional professional development for its association members. State 4-H programs could also use the results to professional development for both new and seasoned professionals. The research is sparse regarding whether or not the 4-H PRKC is being used at the state level beyond the two studies cited. More research is needed to ensure the PRKC is current and holistic, as well as to measure the impact of the PRKC framework has on the 4-H program.

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