

Reconceptualizing Youth Leadership Board Curricula: An Instructional Design Approach to 4-H State Officer Leadership Development Programming

Need for Innovation

4-H youth development professionals have found that electing officers provides youth with the opportunity to practice leadership that could translate to adulthood, particularly with respect to delegation, communication, negotiation, and teamwork (Van Horn et al., 1998). There is also a historical precedent for formal leadership trainings in 4-H. Early iterations for such leadership development opportunities included regional leadership training schools and camp counselor leadership programs at the local and state levels (Hoover et al., 2007). With regard to 4-H officer training programs, particularly for 4-H state officer boards (also known as 4-H State Council in some states), a general history or summary of curricular inputs is not readily apparent. Conversely, organizations such as FFA can trace leadership training schools for officers at state, regional, and national levels to the 1940s and 1950s (Knauer, 1950; Tenney, 1977). If formal 4-H state officer training programs have been independently initiated and developed by state 4-H programs over the years, efforts to document these and share best practices are absent from the literature.

From a single state's perspective, the [State] 4-H State Council has operated as the youth governing board for the [State] 4-H program since the 1960s. The group currently consists of 13 total members with five officers (president, vice-president, treasurer, secretary, outreach coordinator) and representatives from each of the [State's] extension regions. In addition to a listening tour conducted with state 4-H staff associated with the [State] 4-H State Council both past and present, document analysis techniques (Bowen, 2009) were used to conduct a thorough review of the electronic and paper records pertaining to the council. These documents included applications, personal correspondences, fact sheets, internal reports, and how-to guides. It was surmised that no formal curriculum has been used for the training and leadership development of these youth nor has any consistent, longitudinal means of assessment or evaluation ever been conducted to measure program impacts on any known variables. Given that the council falls under [State] 4-H's leadership and civic engagement program areas, it was determined that a formal state officer curriculum should be instituted to serve as the foundation for the youths' leadership development.

This sentiment is in line with recommendations from previous research regarding 4-H officers in which it has been found that 4-H officers who receive some type of formal officer training generally perform at higher levels than those who do not receive formal training (Tassin et al., 2010). Research specifically about 4-H state leadership boards is somewhat limited, but what has been found suggests that serving as a 4-H state officer has positive implications for leadership life skills development (see Kelsey, 2020; Kelsey & Fuhrman, 2020) and the perceptions of youth adult partnerships (see Moran et al., 2019). There is justification to conduct more research on leadership and 4-H state officers particularly regarding the relationship between external factors and leadership life skills development (Moran et al., 2019) as well as 4-H state officers' leadership development in other contexts (i.e., different states/4-H programs). While 4-H as a national entity purports to develop youth leaders and as a matter of programmatic philosophy

(see National 4-H Council, 2020), the word leadership appears nowhere in the most recent National 4-H Index Study publication (see Gagnon et al., 2023). Though a simple observation, it might suggest the existence of a broader knowledge gap regarding leadership research and evaluation in 4-H programming as a whole.

Program Phases

A formal curriculum has been devised for the [State] 4-H State Council in an effort to establish obtainable learning outcomes and to standardize the experience for 4-H'ers directly impacted by the program so that they can develop their leadership in such ways that are grounded in purposive educational inputs and evidence-based practices. The new curriculum for the [State] 4-H Council was developed using the principles of instructional design (Gagné, 1985). Specifically, the model devised by Dick et al. (2005) served as the curricular planning mechanism for outlining program purpose, learning outcomes, inputs, and assessments. The resulting “syllabus” for the council was essentially developed much like a college course’s syllabus. The key differences are the target population consists of adolescents rather than emerging adults; exposure to the curriculum is a full year (officer term length) rather than an academic semester; and learning occurs in non-formal settings more often than formal settings due to the disposition of council members (e.g., council members are from all corners of the state geographically speaking; council members participate in events and meetings at various points during the year). During their term in office, state council members will engage in activities, leadership lessons, and experiences devised by university faculty to contribute to their leadership development. Throughout the year, they will complete cornerstone assessments such as reflections, exploratory essays, interviews with leaders, and check-in activities to determine the degree to which they are synthesizing and applying the content learned during their time on council. During the year, group discussions guided by the nominal group technique (Delbecq et al., 1975) will inform formative evaluation efforts, while exit interviews and surveys will serve as the mechanisms for summative program evaluation at the end of council members’ term of office. Data-driven evaluation efforts will be vital for programmatic improvements and adjustments to ensure that the [State] 4-H State Council and its curriculum provide youth the best opportunities to grow and thrive as leaders in adolescence and emerging into adulthood.

Implications

In addition to program enhancement, the evaluation data is intended to be shared with other state 4-H leadership boards’ faculty and youth development professionals with a long-term intention of strengthening the leadership development experiences of 4-H officer programs nationally and fostering a spirit of collaborating over best practices in this aspect of 4-H programming. Likewise, collecting research data on leadership life skills development in a new context and taking into account external factors as additional variables should contribute to the small body of literature regarding 4-H state officers and leadership development. Additionally, efforts in this area should also contribute to the extant knowledge gap regarding an empirically-substantiated relationship between leadership development and 4-H programming. At present, there is no associated monetary cost with these efforts. However, funding could be necessitated for program enhancement as a result of needs identified by evaluation.

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