

ASSOCIATED FACTORS IN RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF 4-H MEMBERS IN WEST VIRGINIA

Gary J. Wingenbach, Assistant Professor
Terence Meighan, Graduate Student
Layle D. Lawrence, Professor
Stacy A. Gartin, Professor
Jean M. Woloshuk

West Virginia University

Abstract

This study was designed to determine effective recruitment and retention techniques for increasing enrollment in the West Virginia 4-H program. Data were collected for this survey research from county 4-H club leaders and Extension agents via two mail questionnaires. The sample consisted of 165 county 4-H club leaders and 55 Extension agents. A total of 115 (52%) usable questionnaires were returned. Participants rated the perceived importance of various recruitment and retention techniques used by 4-H club leaders. The highest rated recruitment techniques were "have exciting and active clubs to entice others to join," "word of mouth--friends telling friends about 4-H," "make meetings/programs interesting and fun," "make members feel welcome," and "allow 4-H members to participate and take active roles in the club." The highest rated retention techniques were "an effective county agent, staff, and 4-H leader," "must be pro 4-H," "fun camping programs," "provide praise, motivation, and encouragement," "let older members know how important they are to the success of the club," and "provide efficient and fun meetings, programs, and activities." In-service workshops for West Virginia Extension agents and 4-H club leaders should be conducted on organizing an effective and exciting 4-H club meeting and maintaining a dynamic 4-H club.

Introduction

4-H clubs can be found in urban, suburban, and rural or country areas (*This is 4-H*, 1967). Members participate in club activities such as special-interest groups, short-term programs, community clubs, and camping. Special-interest topics may include studies in rose culture, model rocketry, or consumer buying and are offered through workshops, meetings, or simulated experiences. Short-term programs are used to educate large numbers of youth about various subjects, including career choices, or fire, water, or bicycle safety. Camping is the most intensive method of educating 4-H members. Because members are exposed to group living conditions and activities, they develop interpersonal skills and self-confidence (Jackson, 1997).

Involvement in such experience-centered curriculum helps youth develop life skills and prepares them to explore lifelong occupational careers (Woloshuk, 1988). 4-H projects from the 1960's centered on livestock projects (sheep, pig, and calf) and garden projects (corn, potatoes, flowers, and canning) (Stewart, 1969). Current special interest projects such as the "Bluebird Project" in Pendleton County, West Virginia, offer 4-H members the opportunity to become active participants in solving community-based issues. Bluebird project 4-H members built 350 nesting houses, to arrest the sharp decline of bluebirds and their nesting sites.

The bluebird example illustrates that the issues and concerns facing youth today are incongruent with traditional 4-H projects. Topics such as career exploration, biology, conservation, teen

pregnancy, recreational activities, drugs, poverty, and pollution are all present concerns of our nation today. Old topics must be expanded and new topics must be developed in order to address new issues. Likewise, previous recruitment and retention techniques used by 4-H club leaders may not be effective when attracting youth to 4-H membership today.

Throughout the history of 4-H, recruitment and retention of youth has been a major factor affecting the success of 4-H groups. Stewart questioned what recruitment techniques would be most effective in attracting and retaining youth in 4-H. This study attempted to ascertain the most effective 4-H recruitment and retention techniques in West Virginia.

Review of Literature

4-H clubs are non-formal educational programs. Membership is voluntary and is guided jointly by the Cooperative Extension Service and land grant universities (Reck, 1951). 4-H incorporates different teaching and learning techniques and interest projects to reach youth 9 to 21 years of age regardless of race, color, or national origin (Woloshuk, 1988). There are more than 5,000,000 4-H members and over 37,000,000 former 4-H club members in the United States today. Members choose from a variety of projects and group activities including speeches, demonstrations, judging, tours, camps, trips, and county events (Jackson, 1997). Through projects and activities, 4-H members learn valuable information that should be useful later in life.

The 4-H educational approach stresses "learning-by-doing." Participation in 4-H clubs teaches children moral values and standards. 4-H helps youth cope with the societal changes and stresses the importance of work, responsibility, and individuality. 4-H teaches members about the responsibilities of citizenship in one's community, country, and world. Young people in 4-H learn to express their own ideas and actively listen to,

understand, and respect what others have to say (Jackson, 1997). 4-H helps young people appreciate nature, understand conservation, and learn to use resources wisely. 4-H teaches the importance of decision making and problem solving in agriculture and home economics.

4-H continuously has proven to be a whole-learner youth development program. 4-H has a unique ability to change programs in order to meet the needs of children. One of these necessary changes was the ability to expand and meet the needs of urban youth. The environment of many urban youth exposes them to drugs, poor nutrition, and violence. A University of Florida based 4-H program teaches children about proper nutrition, wise decision-making, personal hygiene, teenage pregnancy, and saving money (Williams, 1991).

Since 4-H membership is voluntary, some youth choose to participate and some choose to drop out. Norland and Bennett (1993) found that dissatisfaction with participation was highly associated with quitting the 4-H club. Also, 4-H members' feelings of commitment, responsibility, and the skills gained when working with younger members contributed to member satisfaction. Other factors contributing to members' satisfaction included high quality club meetings and positive parental involvement. Parental praise provided a positive impact on older member retention. Peer pressure was considered a great deterrent to participation. The longer an individual was involved, the more likely he or she would continue to be involved. Urban and rural youth exhibited no differences in their satisfaction levels. What a 4-H member receives from the experience (feelings and responsibility) may be more important than the actual experience.

Extension educators have speculated that 4-H loses youth to other activities. A study of the 4-H program in Indiana showed that youth left the program because they were dissatisfied with club activities (Ritchie & Resler, 1993). The three most frequent reasons for dropping out of 4-H clubs

ranged from: 1) boring meetings, 2) involvement with sports, and 3) time needed for jobs. Many participants expressed a need for specific help with projects at club meetings. The dropouts felt that although most 4-H leaders in Indiana were volunteers, the volunteers were not doing enough. This study suggested that Indiana 4-H volunteer leaders needed more support in programming club activities.

The overall success of the 4-H educational youth development program depends on the recruitment and retention of members. One measurement of an effective 4-H club leader is the ability to recruit and retain members into early adulthood. A need existed to determine the most effective recruitment and retention techniques in West Virginia as perceived by 4-H club leaders and state 4-H Extension agents.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to determine the most successful recruitment and retention techniques used to sustain and increase 4-H membership in the West Virginia 4-H club program. The objectives of this study were to:

1. Identify recruitment techniques used by 4-H club leaders and Extension agents.
2. Identify retention techniques used by 4-H club leaders and Extension agents.
3. Rank the effectiveness of the identified recruitment and retention techniques.

Procedures

Descriptive survey methodology was utilized in this study. The primary advantage in using this methodology was the accumulation of large amounts of data (Borg & Gall, 1989). The target population consisted of all 55 Extension agents responsible for 4-H and all 165 club leaders in West Virginia's 55 counties. Each 4-H agent was

asked to choose randomly three 4-H club leaders from their respective counties to participate in this study. The sample consisted of 165 county 4-H club leaders and 55 Extension agents. The sample was limited by the 165 county 4-H club leaders because 4-H agents may not have chosen club leaders in a completely random manner. A tendency may have been to choose club leaders who were most likely to complete the questionnaire. The results should not be generalized to all West Virginia 4-H club leaders.

Data were collected via two questionnaires that were mailed to county 4-H club leaders and 4-H Extension agents in West Virginia. A modified Delphi technique was used to obtain the desired information. The first questionnaire, mailed to club leaders, consisted of open-ended questions designed to obtain a wide range of responses. Using their own opinions and experiences, 4-H club leaders identified the three most effective techniques used to recruit new 4-H members and the three most effective retention techniques that keep members in 4-H. A response rate of 45% ($n=75$) was achieved. Telephone calls to each 4-H Extension agent were made so they could remind 4-H club leaders to promptly return the questionnaire.

A Q-sort committee formulated the second questionnaire. Four members condensed and combined initial responses into statements without altering their original meanings. The second questionnaire was divided into two categories: effective techniques used to recruit new members into the 4-H program and effective retention techniques that keep members in 4-H clubs throughout their teen years. A panel of experts from the agricultural education faculty and Extension specialists at West Virginia University reviewed the instruments for face validity.

The second questionnaire was mailed to the same 165 county 4-H club leaders from the first round and to each 4-H Extension agent in West Virginia's 55 counties. Respondents rated effective

techniques identified in the initial survey, using the scale: 1 = not effective, 2 = somewhat effective, 3 = effective, and 4 = very effective. The final response rate was 52% (N = 115), consisting of 37 Extension agents and 78 4-H club leaders. No attempt to contact nonrespondents was made, as this study was limited to the respondent group only because of possible frame error. The research instrument resulted in a Cronbach's alpha of 0.92. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the data.

Findings

Each respondent indicated his/her status (4-H club leader or Extension agent), district, age, gender, years as a 4-H club leader, and if he/she was a former 4-H member. Of those responding 57% of the agents were females and 90% of the leaders were females. Over 70% of the agents who responded were former 4-H members and over 80% of the 4-H club leaders were former 4-H members (Table 1).

Table 1. Demographics of Respondents

		<u>Agents (n=37)</u>		<u>Leaders (n=78)</u>	
		Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
District	Central	11	29.8	26	33.3
	Eastern	11	29.8	26	33.3
	Western	10	27.0	17	21.9
	Southern	5	13.5	9	11.5
Gender	Female	21	57.0	70	90.0
	Male	15	41.0	7	9.0
Age	25-35	9	24.3	11	14.1
	36-45	8	21.6	31	39.7
	46-55	14	37.8	24	30.8
	56-65	2	5.4	7	9.0
	66+	0	0.0	4	5.1
Years as a 4-H leader	1-5	4	10.8	16	20.5
	6-10	3	8.1	21	26.9
	11-15	3	8.1	16	20.5
	16-20	2	5.4	7	9.0
	21+	5	13.5	17	21.8
Former 4-H member	Yes	27	73.0	63	80.8
	No	7	18.9	14	17.9

Using a four-point scale (1 = Not effective, 4 = Very effective), participants rated the effectiveness of various techniques identified to recruit new members into the 4-H program

Respondents rated "have exciting and active clubs to entice others to join" (3.70) as the most effective recruitment method (Table 2). No recruitment method was rated as ineffective.

Participants rated the effectiveness of various techniques utilized to keep members in the 4-H program. Respondents rated “an effective county agent, staff, and 4-H leader must be pro 4-H’

(3.65) as the most effective method used to retain youth in local 4-H clubs (Table 3). No retention method was rated ineffective.

Table 2. Mean Values for Effectiveness of Individual Recruitment Techniques by Status

Recruitment techniques”	Mean value		
	Grand	Agents	Leaders
Have exciting and active clubs to entice others to join.	3.70	3.70	3.70
Word of mouth-friends telling friends about 4-H activities.	3.67	3.81	3.60
Make meetings/programs interesting and fun.	3.59	3.70	3.54
Make members feel welcome.	3.56	3.60	3.54
Allow 4-H members to participate and take active roles in the club.	3.55	3.54	3.55
Provide recognition and support to all members.	3.46	3.27	3.55
4-H camps: state and local.	3.45	3.35	3.50
Make members and perspective members feel important.	3.43	3.49	3.40
Have regular meetings.	3.40	3.24	3.48
Skating/swimming parties, hay rides, lock-ins, exhibits, and other activities.	3.40	3.35	3.42
A club having and maintaining a good reputation in the community.	3.39	3.32	3.42
Be seen and known; be an active club involved locally and at the state level.	3.31	3.41	3.27
Have members invite friends/siblings to meetings/activities.	3.31	3.38	3.27
Treat members as individuals and adults.	3.30	3.36	3.27
Have a convenient location and time for meetings.	3.22	2.87	3.39
Parents are encouraging their children to join due to their former involvement.	3.21	3.27	3.18
Keep programs interesting with age appropriate activities.	3.19	3.08	3.24
Participate in community service projects.	3.08	2.97	3.13
Create annual strategy plan; organize and plan activities to increase interest.	3.04	2.97	3.07
Show your members you are interested in the club and be active at public events.	3.03	2.78	3.15

Note. Scale values: 1 = Not effective; 2 = Somewhat effective; 3 = Effective; 4 = Very effective.

“To conserve space, 20 other recruitment techniques were rated but are not included in Table 2; all were rated <3 .00.

Conclusions

4-H club leaders who have exciting and active clubs, who rely on 4-H members telling their friends about 4-H, and who make meetings and programs interesting and fun, will continue to

recruit new members into their local 4-H programs. In addition, leaders must make members feel welcome and allow 4-H members to actively participate in the local club. According to the results of this study, these techniques were most effective in recruiting new members into the 4-H

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Effectiveness of Individual Retention Techniques

Retention techniques”	Grand	Mean value	
		Agents	Leaders
A good county agent, staff, and 4-H leader; must be pro 4-H.	3.65	3.51	3.72
An effective 4-H camping program.	3.63	3.65	3.62
Provide praise, motivation, and encouragement.	3.60	3.54	3.62
Let older members know how important they are to the success of the club.	3.55	3.68	3.49
Provide efficient and fun meetings, programs, and activities.	3.53	3.35	3.62
Listening to members’ inputs and needs.	3.51	3.43	3.55
Being a friend, communicating and understanding.	3.46	3.46	3.46
Keep meetings at the same time; be consistent.	3.43	3.35	3.47
Give older 4-H members extra responsibilities.	3.42	3.68	3.30
Friends and family being part of 4-H.	3.40	3.46	3.37
Use older members as mentors.	3.36	3.49	3.30
Awards that recognize members for their achievements.	3.33	2.94	3.51
Keep everyone involved in the 4-H club.	3.32	3.05	3.45
Provide equal opportunities for all.	3.31	3.11	3.41

Note. Scale values: 1 = Not effective; 2 = Somewhat effective; 3 = Effective; 4 = Very effective.

“To conserve space, 19 other retention techniques were rated but are not included in Table 3; all rated <3.3 0.

program in West Virginia. These data supported an earlier study by Norland and Bennett (1993) in that high quality club meetings increased membership enrollment. Also, Ritchie and Resler (1993) found that youth felt a need to be involved in creating their own experiences.

To retain youth in the 4-H program, Extension agents and club leaders must be pro 4-H, encourage active participation in the 4-H camping program, and provide praise, motivation, and encouragement to all 4-H members. To encourage and promote 4-H member involvement through young adulthood, leaders should communicate to

older members how important they are to the success of the club in providing efficient and fun meetings, programs, activities, and listening to members’ inputs and needs. These data support the findings of Norland and Bennett who found that an individual’s feelings of commitment, responsibility, and the skills gained when mentoring younger members were factors that influenced older member satisfaction. Positive parental involvement was highly related to members’ satisfaction. As found in this study, the praise members received from their parents provided a positive impact on older member retention (Norland & Bennett, 1993).

Recommendations

The single most important factor related to effective recruitment and sustained retention of West Virginia 4-H members can be attributed to the Extension agent and/or 4-H club leader. The foundation of this plan should center on assisting 4-H agents and leaders develop a proactive, positive, and supportive attitude towards the 4-H program and its members. The statewide plan should include long-term examination of recruitment and retention techniques used by agents and leaders, as societal changes and demographic shifts affect future 4-H programming.

4-H club leaders and Extension agents must remember that youth will continue to view 4-H activities as fun and connected with the society in which they live. To assure this philosophic stance, Extension agents and club leaders need to promote teamwork between themselves and 4-H members alike. All participants must be pro 4-H and should encourage each other to try innovative ideas. Extension agents and 4-H club leaders should praise, motivate, and encourage each other and their 4-H members.

Inservice workshops for Extension agents and 4-H club leaders should be conducted on organizing effective and exciting 4-H club meetings. 4-H club leaders would benefit from workshops concentrating on the creation and maintenance of a dynamic 4-H club. Further study is needed to learn which recruitment and retention techniques would influence non-members to join 4-H.

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