Engaging Episodic Volunteers in 4-H Project Delivery

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Abstract

Manitowoc and Oconto County 4-H programs piloted two models of 4-H project support which were designed to meet the needs of today’s volunteers, many of whom tend toward episodic involvement. The traditional model for 4-H program support does not easily accommodate episodic volunteerism. Oconto County focused on providing sequential project support on three days of the 4-H year; Manitowoc County provided logistical support for leaders throughout the project year. These models provided options for involving all types of volunteers from traditional project leaders, leaders who have not yet found their niche, and episodic volunteers.
Situation

Many county-based 4-H programs in Wisconsin are feeling the effects of the changing face of volunteerism. In Oconto and Manitowoc counties, the base of project leaders to deliver education to youth, both within clubs and county-wide, was limited. This situation was in direct contrast with a few decades ago, where strong project leadership was associated with each individual community club.

Volunteerism has changed all across North America. In a report prepared for the Canadian Blood Service, Linda L. Graff (n.d.), states that experts in volunteerism relay that the most significant trend in volunteerism today, and one that is expected to continue, is episodic volunteering. Graff describes episodic volunteers as those individuals who contribute to an organization over a three to four month period during the year, or contribute on a recurring basis once per year. In general, episodic volunteers are unable or unwilling to make a long-term commitment with an organization; they prefer to volunteer on a more limited basis than their predecessors.

Episodic volunteers, even with their limited involvement, are interested in making a difference and impacting their chosen cause. Graff reports that volunteer experts "concurred that volunteers need to know that their time has been well spent and that their efforts have made a difference. They need to be connected to the larger cause and outcome of their
contributions." Episodic volunteers are likely to be interested in seeing immediate results of their volunteerism.

Burkman & Boleman (2010) point out that the managing of episodic volunteers can be challenging. They outline four steps for successfully involving episodic volunteers, as follows:

- Develop creative ideas for involvement
- Implement a volunteer management system
- Support the episodic volunteers
- Be creative and flexible.

Graff warns that the new volunteers will not be attracted by the traditional volunteer experience of the past. In order to attract the new volunteers, organizations need to be flexible and creative.

**Objective**

In an effort to engage new volunteers and re-connect with current 4-H leaders, Oconto County and Manitowoc County 4-H piloted two options for project support with potential appeal to a variety of volunteers including episodic leaders, leaders who have not found their niche in the organization, and traditional volunteers.
Methods

Oconto County Response: 4-H Project Days: Multi-session project experience three times per year

Providing project support was a driving force in an organizational development effort in the Oconto County 4-H Program which focused on building organizational capacity and aligning with the core values of the program.

The 4-H Project Day model which was developed in Oconto County identified three days during the 4-H year for youth to meet with their leaders and receive project instruction/exploration at the county level. The first day (Fall Project Kickoff) consisted of project leaders manning displays about their project area, distributing Challenge Cards (see Appendix A), and answering questions from interested members or prospective members. The initial Challenge was to be completed by the youth and brought back to the next Project Day (January Thaw) for further exploration of the project. Challenges were again issued at January Thaw for the next Project Day (Spring Fling). Again, youth completed the challenge and returned to Spring Fling for the final session with their leader.

4-H leaders were recruited to lead the three-session annual project experiences. All leaders had participated in the 4-H Youth Protection training, but many were not active in the program. Leaders readily accepted invitations to teach Project Day sessions. Leaders received coaching in developing mini-educational plans (through the challenges) for their projects, and support in developing their project offerings.
The entire Project Day event was handled by the Oconto County 4-H Project Development Committee including leader recruitment, coaching, logistics, public relations, and registrations. The committee was composed of 6 adult 4-H leaders, and 4 youth leaders. Additional individuals were recruited to help with set-up and event coordination.

**Manitowoc County Response: 4-H Project Central: Centralized location, logistical support**

To counter the lack of project offerings, Manitowoc County developed a system of centralized project delivery which streamlined the logistics, making it easier and potentially more appealing for project leaders to offer sessions county-wide. In this model, 4-H Support Staff at the Extension office handled the arrangements for project meetings at one central location, including scheduling the meeting rooms, collecting registration fees, and communicating participant numbers to leaders. Planning by leaders was limited to their program design and delivery.

Manitowoc County’s goal was to offer two to three different projects each month throughout the 4-H year, with the commitment level determined by the project leader. For example, three photography sessions were offered in 2013-14 hosted by two different project leaders, while one electricity project was offered by one leader. Not all project sessions were taught by 4-H volunteers. Community members were recruited by their special interests; a 4-H leader was in attendance for all sessions as prescribed by 4-H policy. Project Central was typically offered on Saturday mornings and weekday evenings, with the day and time determined by the project leader.
Preliminary Results and Discussion

In Oconto County, the 4-H Project Day model engaged over 30 4-H leaders at Fall Project Kickoff, which resulted in 60 youth attending multiple sessions at January Thaw. Few of these leaders had offered county-wide projects prior to this experience. A key component of this model involved the delivery of 4-H projects with “built-in” educational plans and goal-setting. In addition to engaging or re-engaging project leaders, the project days had the added benefit of providing a clear path for youth leadership; a number of sessions were taught or co-taught by youth.

Manitowoc County piloted 26 Project Central sessions in 21 different project areas the first year, including two day-long events during the summer months – Cloverbud Palooza and Sizzlin’ Summer Fun! Response from the 4-H community was very positive with a total of 171 youth attending Project Central sessions during the first year. The target session participation was eight to ten youth per session, and the actual session participation ranged from one to thirteen youth.

Project Central offerings were communicated to participants with a flyer about one month before the scheduled session. A future goal of Project Central is to identify leaders and projects early and have an annual catalog of project offerings available at the beginning of the 4-H year.
Implications

In 4-H, in order to successfully engage Episodic Volunteers we need to clearly define expected outcomes of our 4-H program if we hope to attract volunteers who "fit" with our programmatic goals, and help them see the impact of the time they donate to our organization. Recruiting and training volunteers with those same program values will help focus volunteers and staff on the same goals.

Both the Project Day Model and the Project Central Model offer clear paths to 4-H involvement that can serve to engage new leaders or re-engage long-time leaders. As 4-H Educators, we continually seek ways to effectively engage volunteers in our programming. Recognizing that existing unengaged volunteers have different motivations, capacity and time, we may find that they will become actively involved given the right circumstances.

Prepared Project Activity Plans and select 4-H Curricula would likely be attractive to both episodic volunteers and traditional volunteers as they develop their challenges and educational plans (see the Learning, Leading, Living series developed for community clubs at http://oconto.uwex.edu/4-h-youth-development/learning-leading-living/)

In addition to meeting the needs of volunteers with limited time, these models may meet the needs of busy families by offering more than one opportunity to attend project meetings during the year. Yet, they may offer less of an opportunity for youth to connect with a leader who is not available year round; this may result in decreased opportunities for youth to develop a relationship with a caring adult.
References Cited

Appendix A: Sample Project Challenge Card