

WISCONSIN 4-H YOUTH DEVELOPMENT



Arts and Communication Program Evaluation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Working Together
Program Evaluation

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Arts have been an important part of the 4-H program since the early days of 4-H in Wisconsin. In the 1930's, College of Agriculture Dean Chris Christensen said he wanted to "Put the culture back in agriculture," launching a statewide consolidated effort to deliver arts programs to rural and small Wisconsin communities. In 2006, the 4-H Arts and Communication Program has grown to enroll 19,000 individual Wisconsin youth in one or more arts and communication projects. 4-H offers over 80 projects distributed over three broad categories: visual arts, performing arts and communications. Five state teams provide additional learning and leadership opportunities to youth from across the state.

To better understand the value and impact of the 4-H Arts and Communication Program, UW-Extension conducted a statewide evaluation in 2006. A representative sample of project participants, totaling 724 youth from 44 of Wisconsin's 72 counties, provided their perspectives by completing a survey. In addition, focus groups and interviews with 41 youth, 19 4-H alumni, and 22 parents in six counties provided in-depth qualitative data about program outcomes.

PROGRAM IMPACT

The 4-H Youth Development Program provides opportunities for youth to build Four Essential Elements for their positive development. This study found that 4-H Arts and Communication Program has the most powerful impact in developing two of these elements: Mastery and Independence. Positive results were also found for the other two elements: Belonging and Generosity.

MASTERY – Constructive Learning

Youth in 4-H can choose to pursue projects in depth and over the course of several years, which contributes to developing related technical, teaching, and communication skills.

Technical skills: Over 80% of survey respondents agree that 4-H participation increases skills in the practice of performing, visual, or communication arts. Participants benefit from pursuing mastery of a project over time, while receiving constructive criticism from their leaders and fair judges. This allows them to improve their technical work while building good learning habits as they integrate feedback from experts.

Creativity: For the measures of creativity, the evaluation results are strong and consistent. Members comment on developing their creativity and gaining confidence in trying new ways of expression.

Communication skills: Many members emphasize growth in presentation and public speaking skills. Surveys indicate that 77% feel comfortable helping less experienced people with projects and nearly as many are comfortable talking about their work with judges or critics. Youth consistently talk of the 4-H opportunities to learn, practice, and become confident in public speaking, a skill they specify as very important.

Teamwork: State team members report that they hone teamwork skills, with over 80% crediting their experiences with helping them understand the point of view of others and work through group disagreements.

INDEPENDENCE – Identity and Self-Discipline

Youth participants experience opportunities to make decisions about their involvement, build skills, and express their creativity, all of which produce powerful outcomes of strengthened individual identity and motivation.

Self-determination: Youth credit the Arts and Communication Program with giving them the opportunities and providing the environment for them to choose their own projects, explore new ideas, and develop their own interests and creativity without external impositions. Over 76% of the youth report that arts and communication activities help them 'quite a bit' or 'a great deal' to develop their motivation to do their best work. This process gives them a sense of satisfaction and ownership over their work that is often missing from other activities in their lives.

You're a lot more independent in 4-H. You don't have a teacher right there to ask 'OK, what do I do next?' You're going to have to problem-solve and figure it out.



Self-esteem and self-confidence: Seventy-four percent say the program helps their self-esteem, agreeing that it makes them ‘feel good about themselves.’ The impact on Independence is even stronger for state team members. Eighty-five percent to 94% of the state team respondents report that their experience has helped them ‘quite a bit’ or ‘a great deal’ on all the indicators of self-determination, self-esteem, and confidence. Members comment on how the program has helped them feel a sense of pride and self-worth, increase their diligence, improve their people skills, and gain important leadership skills.

BELONGING – Caring Relationships

Connecting to adults and peers: Overall survey respondents perceive stronger connections to other youth: about two-thirds of overall 4-H members credit the program with increasing their comfort in settings with people of mixed ages. A sense of belonging is most strongly advanced for state team members. All feel that their experiences have helped them gain skill and comfort in aspects of belonging, with a full 65% rating their connecting and working with adults at the highest level: ‘a great deal.’

When you work for weeks and months and then get first, or maybe grand champion, not only is it the pride...but all sorts of people are going to see your stuff...it all goes back to the work you've put in it.

Building networks in the community: Parents and youth talk about the frequency and ways in which youth seek out and interact with local artists, peers, supportive project leaders, and resource people within their communities, region, and across the state. These opportunities result in youth feeling more connected to their communities, better able to access resources, and effectively interact with others.

GENEROSITY – Service to others

Helping younger members: Members value opportunities to work with and teach younger members. Participants gain self-esteem, reinforce skills, and gain confidence through helping younger members.

CRITICAL PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS

Study respondents credit the 4-H Arts and Communication Program with a number of key characteristics that make it possible for the reported outcomes to be achieved.

VARIETY OF ACTIVITIES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Youth and parents frequently talk about the value of having numerous and varied projects and activities from which to select. Choices not available at school or elsewhere in the community give them the chance to explore various mediums, to find a suitable fit, and to express themselves in different ways.

VOLUNTEER LEADERS

Many 4-H members receive training and support from volunteer leaders within their clubs or at county-wide project meetings. 4-H leaders provide technical expertise in a wide range of arts activities – from photography to basketry – and provide the relationships and support that encourage youth to stay engaged and to improve their work year after year.

It's welcoming; the leaders draw you in. You want to learn more. They make it interesting.

MIXED AGES: SCAFFOLDING OF OPPORTUNITIES

4-H clubs include a wide age range of youth, which affords more experienced youth opportunities to teach in club and project meetings. This multi-age design also provides important role models and relationships for younger members. From their beginnings in clubs, many 4-H members take part in county, multi-county, and state events and groups that give members access to youth and adults beyond their communities who support their interests and learning.

PUBLIC EVENTS: COUNTY FAIRS AND FESTIVALS

Fairs and other public events provide opportunities for members to receive constructive criticism and feedback on their work. Opportunities for public display and performance are both motivating and fun for members.



SELF-DETERMINATION AND VOICE

Youth are engaged and responsible for decisions related to their arts and communication activity from activity selection, to the amount of time and effort they expend, to seeking support when needed and accessing outside resources. Being in charge and reaping the satisfaction of their own accomplishments builds motivation, confidence and decision-making abilities.

SUPPORTIVE CLIMATE

Many youth contrast the competitiveness and peer culture of school with the supportive atmosphere provided by 4-H youth and volunteers. This support enables them to take risks and try new things.

ACCESSIBILITY

For many members, arts and communications projects were the entry point to the many opportunities provided by 4-H Youth Development, since young children can participate. Volunteer leaders also provided materials and support for activities that are not available in many schools and communities.

STATE TEAMS

While they reach a relatively small number of youth, state team members experience strong growth as they work with diverse peers, collaborate with adults, and teach and lead activities at state events for 4-H members and others. These teams also provide incentives for older youth to remain active in the 4-H Youth Development Program.

UNIQUENESS OF THE 4-H ARTS AND COMMUNICATION PROGRAM

The 4-H Arts and Communication Program differs from arts and communications offered through schools, private lessons, church, and community organizations in notable ways:

1. youth meet and interact with new people, across all ages;
2. greater choice and freedom in creativity and expression as compared to the requirements and structure of school programs;
3. more personal, comfortable environment in which to explore, take risks, and develop one's creativity, self-confidence, and leadership; and
4. focus on mastery encourages youth to pursue interests sparked in schools and families, while gaining from the feedback and sharing of skills with others.

The 4-H approach to positive youth development provides an important complement to other, family, school, and community-based institutions in helping achieve optimal outcomes for youth.

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