

Program impact report

Letting creativity flourish —4-H Arts and Communication Program

A new study shows that 4-H Arts and Communication Program participants build strong technical know-how, confidence and self esteem. Younger children use feedback from project leaders and fair judges to improve their work. Experienced youth report they value teaching younger members, working with supportive adults and trying new things — letting their creativity flourish.

Situation

To “put the culture back in agriculture” during the Great Depression, UW-Madison College of Agriculture Dean Chris Christensen created a rural arts program offering workshops and exhibitions. Now, UW-Extension 4-H youth development educators in all 72 counties offer 86 projects in visual, performing, and communication arts such as photography, drawing, painting, music and acting. This is among the largest area of 4-H project enrollment, reaching 19,070 youth in 2006. Research shows that young people in arts courses have better grades and attendance, score higher on the SAT college entrance exam, and are more active in their communities. Other studies show that low-income youth in the arts do better in school and improve their self-confidence, communication and conflict resolution skills. State administrators and county educators wanted to know how participants benefit from 4-H arts and communication projects, and which practices offer most promise for positive individual and social development.

Response

At the heart of 4-H, trained volunteer leaders share their expertise with youth in local clubs. Statewide, 4-H arts curricula address the creative interests of elementary, middle and high school youth who choose their own activities and devote the time and effort needed. Children too young for animal projects often enter 4-H through the arts, developing skills by preparing projects for county fairs, displaying their work, and getting feedback from judges. Talented high school artists and performers study with adult advisors and work at the “almost professional” level with the state Arts Team, Press Team, Drama Company or Showcase Singers, teaching and inspiring younger members as well.

In 2006, UW-Extension campus and county educators conducted a statewide study to determine the value of 4-H arts and communications. From a sample of mixed-age youth from 44 counties enrolled in one or more projects for at least 3 years, 743 provided their perspectives by completing a survey. Another 82 youth, parents and 4-H alumni provided insights through interviews. To measure expected program outcomes, evaluators chose the four essential elements of positive youth development — Mastery, Independence, Belonging and Generosity. Research shows that youth engaged in positive youth development do well in school, establish healthy outside interests, develop basic life skills,

take responsibility, avoid risky behaviors, and are more likely to become productive adults. Findings are published in the Wisconsin 4-H Youth Development ARTS AND COMMUNICATION PROGRAM EVALUATION Final Report : <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/pdande/evaluation/evalstudies.html>

Impacts

The study shows that the 4-H Arts and Communication Program provides participants a supportive and nurturing environment in which to explore creativity, take risks, and assume leadership. Alumni describe how this environment, along with feedback from mentors and judges, enhanced their skills and career prospects. Participants report positive results in all four Essential Elements of Youth Development. Arts and communications have the most powerful impacts in Mastery and Independence — especially among state team members — and strengthen participants' sense of Belonging and Generosity as they develop relationships with supportive local artists and help younger members.

MASTERY — Youth pursue projects in depth —developing strong technical know-how, creativity, and communication skills. As a result of participating:

- 88% of project participants and 91% of state team members surveyed report they are comfortable doing creative activities, while 73% in projects and 91% on teams feel confident expressing themselves creatively.
- 83% in projects and 92% on teams increased their technical skills in visual, performing and communication arts.
- 82% in projects and 92% on teams know how to prepare an arts or communication demonstration.
- 77% in projects and 94% on teams are comfortable helping younger or less experienced people with projects, and nearly as many (72% and 88%) are comfortable discussing their work with judges or critics.

Independence— Youth choose their own projects, explore new ideas and pursue their own interests, building autonomy, self-esteem and self-confidence:

- 76% of project participants and 88% of state team members responding to the survey report that they developed motivation to do their best.
- 74% in projects and 94% on teams improved their self-esteem and feel good about themselves.
- 69% in projects and 85% on teams solved problems on their own, and about the same (68% and 88%) feel they can handle difficult situations.

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February 6, 2007