

4-H Volunteer Continuing Education Academy

Abstract

The 4-H Volunteer Continuing Education Academy was developed to provide 4-H club leaders a continuing education opportunity, to assist them in developing and enhancing the skills and knowledge necessary for their volunteer role, and to provide a means for 4-H livestock and horse club leaders to recertify. All participants reported satisfaction with the academy and indicated that they would attend again and would recruit other volunteers to participate. The academy can be replicated in many ways and introduced at any level to provide continuing education and volunteer support. This article describes the academy and provides information for those who may wish to implement a similar program.

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Introduction and Review of Literature

Volunteers play integral roles in 4-H programs, performing a variety of duties, functions, and tasks and possessing varied and rich knowledge, skills, and backgrounds (Radhakrishna & Ewing, 2011). The success of Extension programming is due, in part, to the dedication of a large cadre of volunteers (Smith, Dasher, & Klingborg, 2005). Although highly valued, volunteer involvement does not guarantee achievement of Extension's goals and fulfillment of learners' needs (Bolton, 1992).

Education is critical in preparing volunteers for the role they accepted and should be designed to enhance their knowledge and skills (Kerka, 2003). Volunteer education develops the knowledge and skills volunteers need to execute their roles effectively (Brudney, 1990; Culp, 1997; Cumming, 1998; Wilson, 1976). Volunteers respond more favorably to roles and responsibilities when they understand and are able to perform the tasks required of them (Hoover & Connor, 2001). Therefore, volunteers need meaningful education opportunities (Fox, Hebert, Martin, & Bairnsfather, 2009). Ineffective volunteer development opportunities result in poorly executed programs and disgruntled volunteers (Cook, Kiernan, & Ott, 1986).

Education, then, is a necessary component of volunteer administration. Multiple volunteer administration models provide a framework for strong, effective volunteer programs (Boyce, 1971; Brudney, 1990; Campbell

& Ellis, 1995; Culp, Deppe, Castillo, & Wells, 1998; Naylor, 1973; Penrod, 1991; Scheier, 1985; Smith & Bigler, 1985; Vineyard, 1981; Wilson, 1976). Although education is a critical component of every volunteer administration model (Fox et al., 2009), Deppe and Culp (2001) found that 4-H programs often lack a structured volunteer development program. When offered, volunteer training is usually formal and focuses on skill development for current or newly accepted roles (Serafino, 2001). However, most volunteers receive little formal training, participating instead in on-the-job experiences and informal mentoring from other volunteers (Fletcher, 1987).

Education benefits volunteers, programs, and organizations in many ways. Education increases volunteer satisfaction and leads to stronger organizational commitment (Anderson, 2005; Wilson et al., 2007). Moreover, volunteer education increases program sustainability (Snider, 1985) and is a powerful recruitment and retention tool, as a lack of training is an often cited reason for high turnover rates among recruits (Fahey, Walker, & Lennox, 2003). Volunteer development benefits the organization by inspiring, motivating, and celebrating accomplishments (Wise & Ezell, 2003).

Extension professionals are well positioned to assess volunteer needs and provide educational and developmental opportunities that serve both volunteer and program needs (Boyd, 2004; Dillivan, 2013). When planning development opportunities, Extension professionals should consider volunteers' training preferences. Fox et al., (2009) identified volunteers' preferred delivery modes as group meetings and electronic communication. Additionally, Fox et al. (2009) determined that 4 H volunteers were most interested in learning about 4-H opportunities and leadership development.

Developing the 4-H Volunteer Continuing Education Academy

Recognizing the need to provide continuing education to volunteers, Kentucky 4-H agents planned and implemented the 4-H Volunteer Continuing Education Academy. The purposes of the academy were to offer club leaders a continuing education opportunity, to develop and enhance the skills and knowledge necessary for their volunteer role, to answer questions, and to provide a means for livestock and horse leaders to complete recertification hours.

In the Kentucky 4-H program, livestock and horse club leaders complete a weekend training workshop to become certified club leaders. In subsequent years, a minimum of 2 hr of continuing education must be completed. Volunteers are often challenged to identify a meaningful, local program that satisfies their continuing education requirement.

Agents began the process of planning the academy by surveying volunteers' educational and programmatic needs. In accordance with online survey responses, the academy involved 10 workshops and was held on a weeknight in the center of an Extension district. A \$15 registration fee covered a meal, an appreciation gift, presenter gifts, and snacks.

An opening session was followed by two concurrent sessions. For those sessions, participants chose from the following options: Horse 101, Livestock 101, Effectively Communicating with Youth, Effective Meetings, Non-Traditional Programming, Achievement Awards Program, Leadership Boards, Adding Excitement to Programs, Community Service, and Fundraising. Both Horse 101 and Livestock 101 were introductory level workshops, targeting newer volunteers, whereas the other topics were appropriate for experienced volunteers. Participants were encouraged to share information and skills and put their knowledge into action.

Results

Participants were 56 adult volunteers (primarily livestock and horse club leaders) from 14 counties, ranging in experience from 1 to 16 years. Each participant received 2 hr of continuing education, a meal, and an appreciation gift. To complete the academy, participants exchanged a completed written evaluation for the appreciation gift. A 100% response rate was achieved.

Every participant reported satisfaction with the academy and indicated willingness to attend again and recruit others. Additionally, participants' feedback suggested that the academy had supplied information and ideas that would help them serve effectively during the coming year. Through qualitative responses, participants indicated that they would

- promote leadership opportunities,
- connect lessons to 4-Hers' interests,
- encourage 4-Hers to keep records for achievement awards,
- involve teens as leaders in other clubs *and* implement new fund-raiser ideas,
- conduct a Facebook photo contest,
- use supplied handouts with 4-H members,
- create a manual with field trip ideas that target hippology,
- implement an Outdoor Adventure Club,
- use polleverywhere.com,
- get livestock kids involved, and
- use the 4-H Essential Elements when working with youths.

Volunteers were surveyed about potential topics for subsequent academies as well. Suggested topics centered on volunteer development, club and behavior management, teaching methods, and introduction of programs and curricula.

The academy was the first opportunity most participants had had to gather and network since certification. As a result of this aspect of the program, participants recommended that *all* club leaders be invited to participate and that the workshop offerings be expanded.

On the basis of the positive participant feedback, Kentucky 4-H agents made plans to hold the academy annually, each autumn. A follow-up study will be conducted to measure longer term program impacts and volunteer retention rates.

Implications

The academy can be replicated in many ways and introduced at any level to provide continuing education and volunteer support. As 4-H agents are aware, programs are continually updated, rules and policies change, best practices emerge, and new teaching and learning techniques are introduced. 4-H units in other states can implement an event such as the academy to provide an opportunity for their volunteers to receive annual updates, exchange information, and network.

When planning an academy, 4-H professionals should consider these programmatic objectives:

- Introduce new programs, projects, events, activities, and rule or procedure changes.
- Provide continuing education.
- Provide networking opportunities for volunteers from different counties.
- Share cutting-edge information.
- Reenergize and inspire volunteers.

A program such as the 4-H Volunteer Continuing Education Academy can provide varied and targeted ongoing education. It can be a critical component in preparing, energizing, and retaining the volunteers who are integral to the success of 4-H.

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