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Factors Contributing to the Retention of Senior 4-H Members: From the Youth Perspective

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Of the almost six million youth reported as 4-H members in 2014, only 610,161 were listed as students in grades 9–12, compared to 1,941,406 in grades 4–8. This great disparity has been a long-held concern of 4-H professionals. Identifying both barriers to and contributing factors for continued 4-H membership is critical in understanding membership trends. This study employed the theoretical framework of Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) to uncover such barriers and contributing factors. Qualitative analysis showed that a desire to terminate 4-H membership during the middle school grades was common, yet perceived behavioral control among 4-H members had the largest impact on whether or not a 4-H member continued involvement. These findings suggest that parents have a large impact on whether a youth continues 4-H membership. Thus, parental education programs related to the importance of 4-H dosage and duration as it relates to positive youth development are key to retaining 4-H members. The researchers conclude with recommendations for putting the findings of this study into action to increase 4-H member retention.

Keywords: positive youth development, theory of planned change, retention, 4-H

Introduction

Of the almost six million youth reported as 4-H members in 2014 in the United States, only 610,161 were listed as students in grades 9–12, compared to 1,941,406 in grades 4–8. The dropout rate of 4-H members as they reach high school age has been a long-held concern of 4-H professionals. While Heinsohn and Lewis (1995) assert that it is developmentally appropriate for a teen to discontinue membership for multiple reasons, other research has indicated the great benefits of continued long-term involvement among 4-H members. According to an eight-year longitudinal youth development study by Lerner and Lerner (2013), 4-H members are more likely than other youth to (a) contribute to their communities, (b) be civically active, and (c) make healthy choices. Identifying the factors that contribute to the retention of high-school aged 4-H members is thus critically important.

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Review of the Literature

Previous research has uncovered pockets of success related to retention of senior-aged (9th–12th grades; 14–18 years of age) 4-H members. One rural Louisiana parish saw a 21% increase in retention of 4-H members in grades 7–12 based on matching program offerings with felt needs, even when these needs varied from traditional offerings (Acosta & Holt, 1991). Acosta and Holt (1991) found that although 4-H might typically offer programs on nutrition, communication, and citizenship, 4-H members indicated needs for topics such as careers, dating, and suicide awareness.

4-H members' overall impression of the favorability of the program may change with age and maturity. An Ohio 4-H study (Homan, Dick, & Hendrick, 2007) found 10th-grade youth were less likely to rate 4-H as fun or cool and more likely to rate 4-H as boring when compared to members in 4th and 7th grades. The same authors found older youth were less likely to agree that being in 4-H was what their friends or family wanted them to do, and less likely to agree they intended to stay in 4-H (Homan et al., 2007).

A youth's sense of belonging within the organization is another critical factor for retention of members. Hensley, Place, Jordan, and Israel (2007) said, "Participation in 4-H is voluntary, and members who do not perceive a sense of belonging or believe they are needed in the organization will limit their participation or resign" (para. 21). Hensley et al.'s (2007) research suggests 4-H youth feel a positive sense of belonging that increases as the degree of 4-H participation increases. A 2012 Wisconsin 4-H Retention Survey conducted by Donnerbauer, Olson, and Witzel also found youth self-report a feeling of belonging as what they like most about 4-H, followed by mastery and recognition, and participation in county fairs. In contrast, the same 4-H members reported activities such as record books, meetings, ineffective leadership, and lack of organization as items they liked least about 4-H (Donnerbauer et al., 2012). Top reasons youth reported staying in 4-H were because they liked being with other kids and they were having fun.

Similarly, Ritchie and Resler (1993) identified displeasure with meetings as the top reason for a young person to discontinue 4-H membership. This displeasure ranges from "boring meetings to not getting enough help with projects" (Ritchie & Resler, 1993, para. 3). Parents of members appeared to hold the belief that volunteer leaders need to do more to make meetings worthwhile and meaningful (Ritchie & Resler, 1993).

Dissatisfied 4-H members are more likely to quit membership. Norland and Bennett (1993) found securing opportunities for high-school aged members to serve younger members and gain responsibility may be beneficial in keeping older members involved in 4-H. Other factors related to increased satisfaction among older members included high-quality club meetings and positive competitive experiences.

It appears the 4-H member's perception of his or her parental support for involvement with the organization has the greatest effect on satisfaction (Norland & Bennett, 1993). Maurer and Bokerneier (1984) agreed that familial support and socioeconomic status appear to affect 4-H membership. Specifically, children of parents who are involved with organizations also tend to seek involvement with voluntary organizations. Additionally, more youth membership in 4-H is found among those whose parents possess higher income and educational levels.

Age and gender of youth also appear to influence 4-H member retention. Harder, Lamm, Lamm, Rose, and Rask (2005) found older youth were less likely to join 4-H as new members than their younger counterparts. Thompson (1998) found 4-H members who re-enrolled had initially joined 4-H at a younger age (average of 9.7 years) than those who did not re-enroll (average of 11.1 years). Youth who did not re-enroll often reported being busy in other activities, which were deemed more important, and contributed to a lack of time for 4-H (Thompson, 1998).

Even youth who wish to remain involved in 4-H may struggle if barriers beyond their control prohibit them from doing so. A study of Pennsylvania teen 4-H members found the top three limiting factors to youth participation were time requirements, financial costs, and their own parents (Gill, Ewing, & Bruce, 2010). This reinforces other previous research that has found parents to have a large influence over whether their children remain involved in 4-H programs (Hartley, 1983; Ritchie & Resler, 1993).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was derived from Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). Ajzen asserted that all human actions are dictated by intentions, and thus whether an individual performs a behavior is dictated by his or her intentions. Based on this theory, the stronger an individual's intention, the greater the likelihood that the individual will complete a related behavior. According to the TPB (Ajzen, 1991), human intentions are guided by three specific types of beliefs:

- Behavioral beliefs (beliefs about possible consequences associated with a behavior),
- Normative beliefs (beliefs about behaviors which are within the parameters of normal behavior based on others' expectations), and
- Control beliefs (beliefs about the amount of control an individual has over a particular behavior due to factors which may impede or assist the ability to complete a specific behavior).

An individual is likely to form behavioral intention when he or she believes a behavior is likely to have positive consequences, falls within a range of acceptable social options, and is achievable. Therefore, when examining the issue of 4-H retention, it is useful to examine what it

is that youth believe are the consequences of 4-H membership, what they believe is socially acceptable, and to what extent the decision to remain in 4-H is within their control. Further, the Theory of Planned Behavior has not been previously used to examine 4-H member retention, and thus, this provides a new lens with which to understand the issue.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study is to explore beliefs impacting senior Florida 4-H members' decisions to continue in 4-H. Specifically, the objectives for this study were to identify and describe behavioral, normative, and control beliefs of senior 4-H members who had chosen to stay enrolled in the organization.

Methods

IRB approval was obtained to conduct this basic qualitative study. A qualitative design was employed to explore individuals' continued participation in 4-H programs. An interview guide, framed using TPB, was developed by the researchers for use with a purposeful sample of eight information-rich (Patton, 2002) youth currently serving in statewide 4-H leadership positions in Florida. Patton (2002) defines "information-rich cases" as "those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research" (p. 169). The information-rich cases for this study were selected based on their personal experiences as senior 4-H members and their relationships with large networks of additional senior 4-H members resulting from their peer-elected leadership positions. Five males and three females, age 15–18 years, were interviewed.

Interviews were conducted in September–October 2015 by the lead researcher. The length of interview time ranged from twenty minutes to sixty minutes depending on the responsiveness of the subject. Participants were briefed with the purpose and methodology of the study and informed as to how their responses would be used. Seven open-ended questions were posed to participants to gather their responses on how and to what extent behavioral, normative, and control beliefs may have impacted their level of involvement with 4-H programs. The telephone-based interviews consisted of open-ended questions that allowed participants to elaborate upon their responses in accordance with their various experiences.

Interviews were recorded, and responses were immediately transcribed by the lead researcher. Data were analyzed through a template analysis (King, 2014). Template analysis provides a framework for the organization of qualitative analysis through several steps, including the designation of *a priori* themes, transcription, initial coding of data, production of initial template, application of the template to full data set, checks for quality and reflexivity, and interpretation

of the results. *A priori* coding simply means that the researcher develops themes before examining the data, and in this case, such themes were designed around the components of Azjen's (1991) TPB.

Trustworthiness for this study was confirmed using quality standards set forth by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Trustworthiness criteria of credibility, transferability, and confirmability were assessed through peer debriefing, purposive sampling, analyst triangulation, and the use of an audit trail. In qualitative research, the truth of the study is dependent on the accuracy of the subjects and the researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Informal member checks were conducted during all interviews to allow both the researcher and the participants to confirm early conclusions.

Results

The findings presented throughout this section share the overarching themes as they pertain to the *a priori* themes with representative direct quotes from participants. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to protect anonymity when sharing verbatim quotes.

Mixed Attitudes Toward 4-H Participation Circa Middle School

In accordance with the TPB (Ajzen, 1991), an individual's attitude toward a behavior may impact that individual's intention to take a certain action. In this instance, a positive attitude toward 4-H programs and benefits of participation may influence a youth's intention to continue membership or not. Although all eight subjects were current 4-H members, their intent to remain involved in 4-H when they were in grades 7–9 was mixed. All respondents indicated they were aware that there would be some personal gain or competitive edge from participating in 4-H (e.g., public speaking, new friends and networks, benefit for college applications), indicating positive behavioral beliefs about the consequences of 4-H. However, two respondents reported they had no desire to remain involved in 4-H during grades 7–9.

Not a "Normal" Choice for Peers

In Ajzen's TPB (1991), normative beliefs refer to an individual's beliefs about the degree to which other people or groups who are important to him or her think he or she should (or should not) participate in a behavior. Participants were divergent in their responses in this area based on whether they were reporting on normative beliefs of their peers or their family.

When it came to peers and nonfamily networks, seven subjects reported they did not believe their membership in 4-H was normal among these groups. Friends were the top nonfamilial group mentioned as not viewing 4-H as a normal activity. Nicole explained, "My friend group was not

cool with it. Sometimes I couldn't participate in things they wanted to do because I was busy with 4-H." Marcus agreed, admitting, "It wasn't really something I talked about to other friends because it didn't seem cool."

In some instances, respondents did not report that friends had an opinion on their 4-H involvement but rather had no opinion or judgment on 4-H at all because it was not an experience with which they had any familiarity. As Scott said, "It's [4-H] just a club that no one else I knew was even participating in." The lack of a sense of normalcy of 4-H involvement did not just come from friends of 4-H members but also from other adults in the 4-H members' networks. Thomas shared, "My sports coaches and some of my clubs, they said it was taking my time from their activities."

While this perceived lack of normalcy presented itself as a barrier for some participants, Maggie shared that she viewed 4-H as positive because it was an unusual choice among her peers. She said,

I go to an IB (International Baccalaureate) school, and I think I'm the only kid in my grade who does 4-H for leadership and not just for the Fair. No one around me was in 4-H at the time except for one friend. I kind of liked that because it was an escape from school and those friends and let me feel special and meet different people.

In Maggie's instance, she appreciated the opportunity to feel she was in some way different from her peers.

Although 4-H membership was not perceived to be a normal choice among peer groups, seven respondents reported they felt 4-H membership was an expectation within their family unit. Nicole shared, "My parents were all for it. My mother was a 4-H alumna, and she is the whole reason I stayed as a member." Marcus agreed that positive maternal influence made his decision:

My mom and family wouldn't have liked me not being in 4-H, but they told me I could drop out if I wanted to. But really I wanted to stay in because my mom said it was a lot of fun at the senior level.

For senior 4-H members who stay in the organization, the influence of family may carry more weight than perceptions of what peers or other adults consider desirable behavior.

Maternal Pressure

Not only was 4-H membership perceived as a familial norm among subjects, but in some instances, there was reported maternal pressure to participate. One participant indicated that it

was completely his decision to be involved with 4-H and he felt no external pressures from others to make the decision. Two participants indicated that while they wanted to participate, there was also an expectation by their mothers that they would participate. Five participants indicated that enrolling in 4-H was their mothers' decision as opposed to theirs, demonstrating they potentially felt little perceived control over their 4-H participation.

Nicole shared, "My mom was the one who signed me up for everything and was like – 'Just so you know, you are doing this.' I didn't really want to, but mostly it wasn't my decision." Scott agreed, "I really didn't want to do Boy Scouts or 4-H. 4-H seemed like it was boring and I wouldn't really get anything out of it. My mom really wanted me to do something." Anne indicated a strong desire to quit 4-H membership without the ability to do so, explaining, "My siblings were in the same boat [wanting to quit during middle school], but my mom made us all participate in 4-H."

Positive Experiences

While many of the subjects reported either a hesitation to join 4-H or a desire to drop out at some point (typically during the middle school years), they did stay involved at a high level, and all eventually became elected state 4-H officers. While it appears maternal pressure/support did play a role, these members also became more self-motivated as they found things within the 4-H program that appealed to them. Five participants specified making friends with like-minded peers at district- and state-level events as a major positive experience through 4-H. Maggie expressed, "My mom said I needed to make friends, and 4-H was the first place I met friends I really liked and felt comfortable with. At the end of middle school, I went to my first Executive Board and met people and saw the potential for more friends."

Marcus shared finding a new network of friends through his position as an elected state officer:

As a senior member, I look back, and when I first joined the program, I didn't have one friend. I now have over 100 friends. I never thought I'd be representing 230,000 kids in 4-H. I just feel loved at every moment with my friends at every 4-H event.

As youth surround themselves with new friends who possess similar normative beliefs (i.e., 4-H membership is positive), this may contribute to a young person feeling a sense of belonging and lead to further commitment to 4-H and a desire to continue membership.

For some, experiences beyond the county, like residential camp, became the springboard to other 4-H activities. According to Jeff, "I went to camp, and that was the first time I was like – 'That was really cool!' And then, Legislature was great, and then I met people who were going to University, so I wanted to go also." Anne reported feeling motivated to continue membership

upon being exposed to greater opportunities designed for senior 4-H members. Specifically identified was this participant's experience with 4-H District Council (youth leadership board). The participant shared, "I went to District Council and met older kids, and they were like, 'It is really fun, and you need to go to Executive Board, Legislature, and University.'"

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

The use of a qualitative approach prevents the generalization of findings beyond the members interviewed, and readers will have to determine the degree to which the conclusions and implications may be applicable to their own context.

Based on these findings and within the context of the TPB (Ajzen, 1991), control beliefs appeared to have a greater impact on the intent of senior 4-H members to stay in the organization than did normative or behavioral beliefs. Youth were either discouraged or outright prevented from dropping out of 4-H by their parents. This parallels previous research suggesting that parents have a great deal of influence over youth out-of-school time activities (Gill et al., 2010; Hartley, 1983; Maurer & Bokerneir, 1984; Ritchie & Reeler, 1993). From a marketing perspective, this finding highlights the importance of educating parents – particularly mothers – about the importance of positive youth development and the benefits of long-term 4-H membership. However, it should be noted that parents may also need education on what constitutes appropriate parental encouragement for 4-H involvement (versus control) within a positive youth development framework. Further education for parents about the 4-H Essential Elements (Kress, 2004), particularly the concepts of belonging and independence, are recommended.

Most of the interviewed senior 4-H members expressed a desire to drop out of 4-H at some point. Youth typically experiment with different activities, particularly during the middle school years (Heinsohn & Lewis, 1995). Understanding this need for experimentation among youth, 4-H programs should consider employing more short-term project experiences that allow for such experimentation rather than consistently locking 4-H members only into long-term (i.e., one or more years in length) projects. Experiences such as 4-H camps and conferences that 4-H members recalled positively are examples of activities that allow youth to try new things without feeling obligated to commit (Rogers, 2003). Based on this, further exploration of the short-term 4-H SPIN (Special Interest) Club model may prove beneficial to increase engagement of older youth.

Participants in this study expressed that their 4-H participation was not viewed as a normal choice among their peer groups. One reason for this may be the use of the community-based club model employed by Florida 4-H, which is conducted independently of the school environment. Activities available through a youth's school may be perceived as more normal

among peer groups because all youth in the school community are exposed to that activity or program. Increased presence in the school environment may help to normalize 4-H as a youth choice and increase a 4-H member's intention to remain in 4-H (Ajzen, 1991). Targeted use of school enrichment programs, school-based clubs, and afterschool programs may assist in this effort.

All 4-H members interviewed shared positive beliefs about senior-level activities beyond the club and county level. Local 4-H programs should pay attention to marketing new opportunities during the intermediate 4-H member ages (11–13 years), such that 4-H offerings continue to feel new and fresh as a young person advances through the program. Florida 4-H currently offers one statewide weekend retreat targeting middle school-aged youth. It is recommended this event be designed to engage participants in unique experiences and programming only offered to youth of this age group. It is further recommended that a second aim of this event is the intentional marketing of senior-level 4-H activities to middle school-aged participants to help develop the belief that positive consequences will result if they stay with the 4-H program (Ajzen, 1991). 4-H programs that are intentional about incorporating strategies such as this, as well as others designed to positively impact behavioral, normative, and control beliefs, are likely to see increased numbers of youth choosing to remain in 4-H through their senior membership years.

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