

Wisconsin 4-H Youth Development leadership programs: the 4-H difference



Today's employers are placing more and more importance on applied skills, according to the 2006 *"Are They Really Ready to Work? Employers' Perspectives on the Basic Knowledge and Applied Skills of New Entrants to the 21st Century Workforce"* study conducted by several business and workforce non-profit organizations. The study showed that companies value skills like teamwork and collaboration, oral communication and professionalism in new workers across all education levels.

4-H Leadership Experience

Participation in leadership activities can help youth strengthen their skills in areas like public speaking and communication, teamwork, conflict resolution and more, skills that are increasingly important to employers. Wisconsin 4-H Youth Development and University of Wisconsin-Extension, Cooperative Extension youth programs offer many opportunities for youth to be involved in leadership activities. Within 4-H Youth Development, youth can become club officers, join county committees, serve as camp counselors and join state teams and more. There are many other leadership opportunities available to youth, including some within Cooperative Extension, like being on a community coalition, serving as a teen court panelist or acting as a local government representative.

The 4-H Difference

But with many leadership activities available through other youth organizations, what makes the 4-H experience different? In the fall of 2010, Wisconsin 4-H Youth Development surveyed a random sample of nearly 300 youth involved in 4-H and other Cooperative Extension youth activities. The youth were asked which other types of leadership opportunities

they had participated in and how their experiences in Wisconsin 4-H Youth Development and Cooperative Extension were different from other leadership activities.

The youth surveyed reported being involved in more than 70 different activities. About two-thirds of respondents were involved with leadership activities outside of Wisconsin 4-H Youth Development and Cooperative Extension.

The survey also asked youth to describe how leadership activities in Wisconsin 4-H Youth Development and Cooperative Extension differed from their experiences with leadership programs elsewhere. The most common reported differences addressed the variety of programming, leadership opportunities and skills learned.

Comprehensive Programming

Nearly one-quarter of youth said Wisconsin 4-H Youth Development and Cooperative Extension leadership opportunities had more comprehensive and varied programming.

- "4-H covers a wide variety of things and taught me to be a well-rounded individual whereas other leadership roles may sometimes mold a person into one type or another," one youth said.
- Another youth responded, "4-H is not necessarily different from my other activities, but more in-depth. It specializes in everything under the sun and allows me to figure myself out in a million different ways."

Variety of Activities

Youth also valued the variety and strength of leadership activities offered; 17 percent of respondents said that was the most important way Wisconsin 4-H Youth Develop-



ment leadership differed from other programs.

- “With other activities I am involved in, adults usually take all the leadership positions and plan out all the activities,” one youth said. “With 4-H I have a chance to do these leadership positions myself.”
- And leadership skills learned in 4-H are useful in other areas of life, too: “Whether you’re at school, home, work, camp or basketball practice, you can be sure 4-H has a leadership skill for you,” one respondent said.

Skill-Building

Many other youth felt their leadership activities within Wisconsin 4-H Youth Development and Cooperative Extension contributed to skills in communication, teamwork, community involvement and responsibility as well as helped them meet new people.

- “The leadership opportunities that I participate in outside of 4-H have me interacting with my peers,” one youth said, “While 4-H activities have me interacting with youth of all ages.”
- Others valued the increased awareness of community issues: “Through 4-H, I really got to understand the meaning of community and how we are all connected. 4-H has helped to motivate me to better myself and my community and also given me opportunities to do so,” said one response.
- According to other participants, 4-H imparts a different sense of responsibility. “In other programs I have participated in, I’ve only had the responsibility of the position I held,” one youth said. “In 4-H I have the responsibility of my projects, my office and the other members in my club.”

With more than 12,900 youth ages 11-19 involved in Wisconsin 4-H Youth Development and Cooperative Extension leadership activities, these youth programs continue to impact Wisconsin’s future leaders. Survey responses indicate that 82 percent of 11 to 19-year-old 4-H members in Wisconsin have taken a leadership role in their clubs and community. With nearly 13,000 4-H members enrolled in this age range, Wisconsin 4-H Youth Development is making a significant contribution to developing youth skills for the present and future benefit of families, employers and communities.

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