

Building Welcoming 4-H Clubs: A Participatory Evaluation Project for Community Clubs

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Abstract

Belonging is one of the essential elements of 4-H Youth Development programs, and a significant factor in recruiting and retaining youth members for community clubs. Washington County used a participatory evaluation process to develop an interactive evaluation process that identifies welcoming and unwelcoming behaviors in 4-H community clubs. The key resource developed is a rubric that can be used to gather data during community club meetings. This tool will be used in a collaborative process in which youth and adults visit clubs and share feedback. Clubs will also assess their own environment. Data will be compiled from all observations to build a picture of the most successful things that clubs are doing to build a welcoming environment, and to identify the areas where clubs need to improve. The rubric and the training materials created for this project can be adapted for use in other county 4-H programs as a program quality improvement resource.

Situation

The four essential elements of 4-H programming are belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity (Kress, 2004). It's no accident that belonging comes first in that list. Belonging is the stepping stone to mastery, independence, and generosity. It feels good to belong. Anyone who has experienced the excitement and relief of feeling that you 'fit in' in a new social setting understands the importance of belonging. The human brain seeks comfort before learning can happen effectively. If a child does not feel welcomed in a learning environment, their brain functions will inhibit their ability to retain information (Walsh, 2014). This is why it is crucial to establish a sense of belonging in youth development programs, and why 4-H Youth Development strives to provide safe and inclusive program environments.

Since 4-H community clubs rely on adult volunteers for program delivery, these volunteers must have the skills to create and sustain welcoming and inclusive environments. Youth already involved in the 4-H Community Club program must also be open to working with youth from different backgrounds. The Wisconsin 4-H Retention Study collected survey data regarding why young people drop out of 4-H. 29% (13) of the 45 respondents said that one of the reasons they left 4-H was "I did not feel welcome at club or project meetings." Many of the youth who remain in 4-H find the sense of belonging in 4-H to be appealing; but it can be challenging for youth just entering the program to establish that feeling of belonging. Much of the 4-H jargon and institutional structure can be alienating for a new 4-H member.

In response to these challenges, the Washington County 4-H Leaders Association Expansion & Review Committee identified the importance of building more welcoming environments in 4-H community clubs. They reviewed population and enrollment data and

confirmed that the racial and ethnic makeup of current community club members does not reflect the growing diversity in Washington County residents. The committee also identified additional underrepresented audiences in Washington County 4-H including single parent families, low income families, and families affected by limited access to transportation.

Washington County UW-Extension 4-H Youth Development staff made it a priority to support more inclusive environments and policies in community clubs so that youth from a variety of backgrounds could find value in the 4-H experience. As a result, the Building Welcoming 4-H Clubs participatory evaluation project was developed. Dr. Mariah Kornbluh from California State University, Chico collaborated with 4-H Youth Development Educator Brianna Stapleton Welch to support this project.

Objectives

The Building Welcoming 4-H Clubs project is designed to help 4-H community clubs in Washington County strengthen their inclusive, welcoming environments. Participating clubs will have youth and adult volunteer researchers visit two of their club meetings during the year. These club researchers will give feedback about each club's unique environment using a rubric to assess welcoming behaviors. The project will address the issue of 4-H member retention and recruitment by helping clubs identify key practices for promoting a welcoming environment, and areas for growth.

Involving current adult volunteers and youth members as evaluators is key to the project's design. Youth-adult partnerships in evaluation and research have the potential to fuel meaningful organizational change (Flores, 2008). The youth and adult researchers for the project were recruited from the pool of current community club volunteers and youth leaders.

These researchers will have the chance to handle new situations and develop empathy for other perspectives as well as learn observation skills. The project is also designed to create an opportunity for youth and adult researchers to feel more invested in helping Washington County 4-H to grow and improve. Through observations of other clubs, youth and adult researchers will have the chance to broaden their perspectives on what is possible in the 4-H community club setting.

Method

To develop the initial rubric for gathering information during club visits, the authors triangulated data from various sources: 1) the youth development literature (Akiva, Cortina, & Smith, 2014; Zeldin, Christens, & Powers, 2013), 2) practitioner developed tools utilized to promote inclusive and welcoming organizational practices (Krause, 2012; Creighton & Kivel, 2011; Wu, Kornbluh, Weiss, & Roddy, 2016), 3) focus groups with 39 4-H youth and adults discussing inclusive and exclusive club behaviors, and 4) one on one interviews with 18 4-H youth.

Guided by the organizational and youth development literature (Maton, 2008; Wu et al., 2016; Zeldin et al., 2013), we divided the rubric into four critical categories:

1. The roles of adult volunteers, youth officers, and leaders
2. Club customs
3. Physical environment
4. Meeting practices

Following standard principles for developing measurement tools and observation rubrics, the authors established a rating scale from 1 (low) to 5 (high), with specific descriptions for scores 1, 3, and 5. A youth focus group was consulted to generate the descriptions for each ranking. After developing an initial draft the authors conducted a pilot observation at a 4-H community club. They achieved satisfying consensus. The authors then had a group of 4-H adults and youth test the rubric at community club meetings, and revised the rubric based on their suggestions.

Key Elements of the Rubric

Four key dimensions were identified. Dimension one consisted of best practices for adult volunteers, youth officers and club leaders. Here, the authors were interested in examining the behaviors of key stakeholders holding leadership positions within the club space. Notably, the organizational literature highlights the role of those in positions of power as central in facilitating interpersonal dynamics among group members (Maton, 2008; Schein, 2010). Furthermore, the interviews and in-the-field observations stressed the critical need for club leaders to assist new members in understanding the necessary steps for participation in 4-H activities. The rubric measured whether adult volunteers and youth officers: (1) effectively and enthusiastically engaged new members, (2) were intentional in facilitating relationship building between new and current families, (3) were on time and prepared to lead, and (4) clearly translated 4-H rhetoric and requirements to new members.

Dimension two measured the customs and larger culture of the 4-H community club. Prior field observations and feedback from 4-H members stressed the need for 4-H clubs to be strategic in facilitating feelings of connection and belonging among members. Specifically,

engaging new members in traditional club customs (such as the pledge). In addition, interviews from 4-H youth emphasized the importance of having opportunity to voice their perspectives as central to them continuing their involvement with 4-H. These findings were consistent with the youth development literature, emphasizing importance of young people having a voice in facilitating feelings of belonging, agency, as well as promoting organizational growth (Zeldin, Camino, Mook, 2005; Zeldin, Petrokubi, & MacNeil, 2008). Here the rubric examines: 1) whether the club as a whole promoted feelings of belonging and group identity (such as teaching new members the pledge), 2) were there specific structures in place to bridge connections between new and experienced families (such as a buddy system), as well as 3) were practices in place to elevate the perspectives of all youth.

Dimension three explored the physical structure and layout of the club environment. Research in design literature and environmental psychology emphasizes the importance of an inclusive space being highly visible and accessible to those with various physical needs (Gifford, 2007). Furthermore, the authors observational findings noted the need for diverse 4-H signage as well as the importance of having information available in multiple languages to serve ethnically diverse families for whom English may not be first language. Thus, the rubric examined; 1) if there was visual representation of 4-H throughout the meeting space, 2) if the space easy to locate, and 3) if the space was made accessible and welcoming to diverse needs and cultures.

Dimension four examined the meeting structure. The authors' research findings indicated that 4-H participants enjoyed activities that promoted interactive learning and collaboration. Furthermore, the authors' observations noted the importance of incorporating

participatory elements throughout the club meeting space to maintain member interests. These findings support prior work, which has noted the importance of strong facilitation in order to promote engagement and diverse perspectives (Wu et al., 2016). Here the rubric examined if: 1) meeting practices promoted collaborative dialogue across members with regards to high-stakes decision-making (such as allocating funds), and (2) engaged the diverse needs, ages, and interests of the group.

Implementation

Based on feedback from the youth and adults who tested the rubric, the authors noted that the youth and adults who would be using the rubric to collect data needed preparation before visiting club meetings. A two-hour training was developed to review the objectives of the Building Welcoming 4-H Clubs project, build understanding of the essential element of belonging, and allow the researchers [youth and adult volunteers] to practice using the rubric. The training consisted of the researchers reviewing typical behaviors identified during club meetings and sorting them into low, medium, and high categories of the rubric. The training included video clips of a 4-H community club meeting. Researchers watched the clips and practiced taking notes using the rubric. Each video segment was followed by discussion of what they observed, with a focus on providing constructive feedback through the lens of belonging. In the summer of 2016, eight youth and seven adult researchers were trained to use the rubric for observing club meetings in Washington County.

Seven clubs from Washington County 4-H have signed up to receive feedback through this project. Club leaders and youth officers have been provided with an overview of the project

through small-group trainings. The youth officers will complete a self-assessment of their club using the rubric. Youth and adult researchers will be visiting the meetings of participating clubs throughout the 2016-2017 program year. After the club visits from researchers, data will be compiled to evaluate the club's perception of their welcoming behaviors compared to what visitors to their club experienced. Each participating club will work with the 4-H Youth Development Educator to develop an action plan based on the observational data to address areas where they could strengthen the essential element of belonging within their club.

Implications

The Building Welcoming 4-H Clubs project is a collaborative evaluation effort that allows youth and adults to take an active role in researching the essential element of belonging. Because this process relies on program participants (rather than the 4-H Youth Development Educator alone) to gather data and identify action steps, it is likely that project participants will have more buy-in and support of the resulting program improvement plan.

The project also builds the needs assessment capacity of UW-Extension 4-H Youth Development staff. Data gathered from clubs throughout the county will help the 4-H Youth Development Educator better assess overall needs. The diversity of the data becomes stronger because it will be gathered by multiple individuals with varying perspectives on the 4-H experience. This information will inform future volunteer and youth training opportunities offered at the county level.

The club researcher role created for the Building Welcoming 4-H Clubs project offers a unique new leadership experience for youth and adult volunteers. They will have the

opportunity to strengthen their observation and research skills as they visit clubs throughout the community. The majority of youth and adult researchers who have been trained thus far have signed up for the opportunity because they are eager to see different ways of facilitating 4-H community club meetings, and they want to bring new ideas back to their own clubs for implementation. This cross-pollination of ideas has the potential to bring positive change to the community club program.

The club evaluation rubric and the researcher training materials were designed with enough flexibility to be used in other counties. These tools could be adapted throughout Wisconsin as a resource for counties who wish to focus on the enhancing the essential element of belonging in 4-H community clubs.

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Name _____ Date ____/____/____
 Club Observed _____



Dimension 1

Adult Volunteers, Youth Officers, & Youth Leaders:
 a) welcome members,
 b) go beyond existing social circles,
 c) make an effort to work in partnership, and
 d) communicate clearly and deliver information in a friendly manner.



	Low <i>1 pt.</i>	Medium <i>3 pts.</i>	High <i>5 pts.</i>	Notes and Ranking
Item 1.1 Adults and youth take time to greet people as they enter.	There is no one to say "hi" or greet newcomers. Adults and youth are talking amongst themselves and do not approach newcomers.	An adult or youth says "hi", but there is no name recognition for certain members, or follow-up conversation. Some members are greeted while others aren't.	Adults and youth greet each person and learn the names of newcomers. Members are invited to find a place to sit or engage in a welcoming activity or conversation. Visitors or new members are introduced.	1 2 3 4 5 Comments:
Item 1.2 Adult Volunteers and Youth Officers initiate contact with others, facilitating introductions, and helping members build relationships.	Existing and potential members come in and sit down for the meeting. They don't socialize with anyone. Adult Volunteers don't engage them.	Adult Volunteers or Youth Officers acknowledge newcomers at the beginning of the meeting but don't connect with new members or guests beyond introductions.	Adult Volunteers or Youth Officers introduce visitors or new members to others, and invite them to join in conversations. Adult Volunteers or Youth Officers check in with new members throughout the meeting.	1 2 3 4 5 Comments:

<p>Item 1.3 Adult Volunteers and Youth Officers are present and ready to greet, welcome, and lead before the meeting begins.</p>	<p>Adult Volunteers and/or Youth Officers are late, and are not ready to begin the meeting at the planned start time.</p>	<p>Adult Volunteers and/or Youth Officers arrive in time to begin the meeting as planned but are not available to help with set up, welcoming, or preparation before the meeting.</p>	<p>Adult Volunteers and/or Youth Officers arrive early to prepare the meeting space and greet club members. The meeting begins on time.</p>	<p>1 2 3 4 5 Comments:</p>
<p>Item 1.4 Youth Officers and Youth Leaders clearly explain each opportunity, event, or expectation when presenting to a club.</p>	<p>Youth Officers and Adult Volunteers expect everybody to know about club opportunities or to find out for on their own. They don't explain 4-H terms or customs to new members. They are hard to hear.</p>	<p>Youth Officers and Adult Volunteers briefly review new information or club opportunities. They don't always explain acronyms or 4-H phrases. They are at times difficult to hear, and don't allow time for questions.</p>	<p>Youth Officers speak loudly when presenting. They thoroughly review information about club opportunities, or partner with Adult Volunteers to share information. Any 4-H acronyms or jargon are explained. Youth Officers and Adult Volunteers allow time for questions.</p>	<p>1 2 3 4 5 Comments:</p>

Dimension 2

Club Customs:

- a) promote group identification,
- b) encourage a group culture of welcoming behaviors, and
- c) elevate youth voice.



	Low <i>1 pt.</i>	Medium <i>3 pts.</i>	High <i>5 pts.</i>	Notes and Ranking
Item 2.1 Meeting space displays the text of the 4-H pledge. Club members help new members with learning the pledge.	Members are expected to learn the pledge by listening/following along. No materials are provided for new members to help them learn the pledge or follow along.	Members can see the pledge on display.	The 4-H pledge is on display, or all members get a copy of the pledge at the meeting. Time is taken to explain the pledge to new members/visitors at the beginning of each meeting.	1 2 3 4 5 Comments:
Item 2.2 Club has some strategy, or some other way to support new families. There is built in time during the meeting for new family support.	No new member support program is in place. Or, the program is in place but not carried out throughout the year.	There is a new family support program in place, however the follow up is minimal. There is not time allotted during the meeting for interactions.	Family supporters are helpful, polite, and answer questions. There is time for new families to ask questions or interact with other families during the meeting.	1 2 3 4 5 Comments:

<p>Item 2.3 Club members promote youth voice and opinion. They seek youth input regarding important decisions.</p>	<p>There is no effort made to gather youth perspectives during the club meeting. Adult volunteers or parents tend to talk the most.</p>	<p>Youth Officers and Adult Volunteers get youth input on some matters. These often consist of low-stakes tasks, such as a party theme or food selection. Alternatively, only a few youth are asked for input.</p>	<p>During the club meeting, youth provide input on all matters. Youth have opportunities to engage in high-stakes decision making (such as deciding how club funds are used, or selecting community service projects). Club officers make an effort to get input from other youth within the club.</p>	<p>1 2 3 4 5 Comments:</p>
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Dimension 3


Environment:

- a) meeting space is set up in an inviting manner,
- b) club identity is visible,
- c) meeting place is accessible, and
- d) environment reflects diverse cultures and needs.



	Low <i>1 pt.</i>	Medium <i>3 pts.</i>	High <i>5 pts.</i>	Notes and Ranking
Item 3.1 4-H club visuals are present.	No 4-H club representation is present. There are no 4-H banners and/or signs indicating where the club meeting is taking place.	There is a 4-H logo at the front of the building or room. Club presence is sparse.	You can see the 4-H presence in the space. Club members wear club t-shirts or other 4-H clothing, or have other ways they can promote club unity.	1 2 3 4 5 Comments:
Item 3.2 It is easy to find the meeting place.	No signs are posted and it is difficult to find the meeting room.	The building or meeting space is clearly labeled and participants can figure out where the 4-H meeting is.	If signs are helpful in the meeting space, the club has them posted to guide newcomers. A welcome area is set up for people to check in or pick up materials needed for the meeting.	1 2 3 4 5 Comments:

<p>Item 3.3 The physical environment is safe for everyone. The space is welcoming to different cultures and backgrounds.</p>	<p>The club building doesn't have an elevator or a ramp. The entrance or exit is blocked or difficult to get through.</p>	<p>There is a handicap accessible entrance to the meeting space. The meeting space is difficult to move around in. Posters and signage reflect only one culture.</p>	<p>The meeting space is handicap accessible. You can easily get in and out of the meeting if you need to go.</p> <p>4-H posters and signs are welcoming to different backgrounds and show members of a variety of ethnicities. If families need materials in other languages, the club has made an effort to meet their language needs.</p>	<p>1 2 3 4 5 Comments:</p>
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Dimension 4	Meetings: a) structured to promote collaboration b) authentic interactions, and diverse participation among members			
	Low <i>1 pt.</i>	Medium <i>3 pts.</i>	High <i>5 pts.</i>	Notes and Ranking
Item 4.1 Interactive discussion strategies are used so that everyone has a chance to participate.	Discussion is not interactive or well-facilitated. Particular individuals dominate the discussion, and side conversations are frequent.	Discussion is facilitated, and members listen to one another. Still certain individuals dominate the group, while others remain silent. Many members appear disengaged.	The discussion is well-facilitated. Facilitators seek out different opinions, and try different strategies to encourage dialogue among members about meeting topics.	1 2 3 4 5 Comments:
Item 4.2 A variety of hands-on activities and teaching strategies are used. Each of the three parts of the meeting (business, education, and recreation) has opportunities for full group involvement. Activities are inclusive of different interests and backgrounds.	No activities are offered. Business meeting is repetitive. No agendas are distributed.	Everybody gets an agenda. Some interactive activities are offered, but they are not engaging or meet the needs of the group.	Everybody gets an agenda. The meeting includes a variety of activities that meet various members' interests.	1 2 3 4 5 Comments: