

**Results of a Study of the Ohio 4-H Camp Counseling Experience and Implications for
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Research Process

Purpose: This descriptive-correlational study was designed to examine the experiences of teenagers who served as volunteer camp counselors at Ohio 4-H camps in 2004. Utilizing a web-based survey to collect the data, the study described camp counselors and the components of the 4-H camp counseling experience by using Chaput, Little, & Weiss's (2004) definitions of intensity, duration, and breadth. Furthermore, considering the camp counseling experience as an organized activity for adolescents, the study documented the personal, interpersonal, and negative domains of that experience. A final goal of the research was to examine whether duration of participation in the Ohio 4-H camp counseling experience was related to these developmental domains. Considering the amount of resources invested in the 4-H camping program in Ohio, the significance of the counselor's role, and the concern for accountability and documenting impact, the present study sought to identify how participating in the educational activity of 4-H camp counseling contributed to the positive youth development of the teens.

Sample: The study was designed as a census of the population ($N = 2,575$) of youth who served as volunteer camp counselors at 4-H residential and day camp programs in 2004. There was a 30% response rate ($n = 779$). The findings provided a snapshot of who Ohio 4-H camp counselors are through the demographic data collected. Three-fourths of the counselors were female and one-fourth were male, with the average age of 15.7 years. The median grade was 10th grade. The counselors reported an average of nearly eight years of 4-H membership and four and a half years of previous 4-H camp participation as a camper. The respondents were from 83 out of the 84 counties who reported having teenage camp counselors and they represented all 15 of the facilities owned or rented for overnight 4-H camping in the state of Ohio.

Methods/Instruments: Data regarding the duration, intensity and breadth 4-H camp counseling experience were collected with a researcher-developed instrument. The Youth Experiences Survey (YES; Hansen & Larson, 2002) was used to measure the extent to which 4-H camp counselors experienced personal and interpersonal development through their participation in the camp counseling experience, as well as the extent of negative experiences they may have encountered. This instrument was designed for use with adolescents to describe experiences in each of the six conceptual domains of learning while participating in structured youth activities, including Identity, Initiative, Basic Skills, Interpersonal Relationships, Teamwork and Social Skills, and Adult Networks. It also measures five aspects of negative experiences: Negative Peer Influences, Social Exclusion, Negative Group Dynamics, and Inappropriate Adult Behavior. Hansen and Larson (2002) reported on the reliability and validity of the instrument. The current version (YES 2.0) has a total of 70 items, all using a four-point response scale with responses ranging from 1 (Not at all), 2 (A little), 3 (Quite a bit), and 4 (Yes, definitely). In the current study, the positive scales had Cronbach's *alphas* ranging from .72 to .87 with exception of Identify Exploration (.54). Negative scales ranged from .59 to .82. These compared favorably with the Hansen and Larson (2002).

To address the validity issue of non-response error, a comparison of the early and late respondents was done to determine if there was a distinction between those who completed the

survey in the first week and those that completed the survey in the final week. Based on chi-square analysis, there were no differences between early and late responders.

Results: Duration was measured by the number of years the teens had been 4-H camp counselors or counselors-in-training, yielding a range of one to six years with a mean score of 2.2 years ($SD = 1.21$). Approximately 64% of the 4-H camp counselors were in their first or second year as a 4-H camp counselor. Intensity was represented by the activities that camp counselors are engaged in during counselor training, camp planning, camp preparation, and the actual time spent at camps (day camps, overnight camps, or both). Camp counselors reported they were required to spend an average of 20 hours in planning and training sessions. Nearly three-fourths indicated they had participated in on-site training. In addition, the counselors spent more than 13 hours in camp preparation beyond countywide training and planning sessions. The majority spent between four and five days at camp.

The breadth of the camp counseling experience focused on the formal and informal teaching, camper supervision, and leadership and membership on planning committees during camp and was described through the variety of the subject matter taught, as well as the variety of the activities planned. Three-fourths of the counselors reported they had taught two or more formal teaching topics. Over half were required to prepare lesson plans for their teaching responsibilities. In addition, the average number of informal topics taught was 2.65. Two primary areas of responsibility described camper supervision. One was in the cabin or sleeping quarters area where counselors supervised an average of just over nine campers. The other area of supervision was with groups where they supervised an average of 18 campers. Describing the leadership on committees, more than 60% of the counselors provided leadership to an average of 2.42 committees. In addition to leading committees, an even larger number (88.9%), reported having served on an average of 2.48 planning committees.

Scores on the YES instrument provided an insight to the many positive experiences that camp counselors have as a result of their participation. It identified skills they learned, opportunities to practice skills, and chances to develop process skills in areas of personal development, interpersonal development, as well as to identify the presence of any negative experiences. The counselors reported having experienced a high level in Teamwork and Social Skills, Initiative, Identity, and Interpersonal Relationships (scale M s between 3.10 and 3.55). To a lesser extent, they are reported having experiences in Basic Skills and Adult Networks (scale M s between 2.60 and 2.96; with the exception of Emotional Regulation, $M = 3.26$). They reported a very low level of Negative Experiences (scale M s between 1.11 to 1.44). There were significant differences between males and females on the scales of Effort and Social Exclusion with females reporting higher mean scores.

The study determined that there was a significant positive relationship between the number of years as a camp counselor and the development of Leadership and Responsibility. The longer the teens were camp counselors, the higher the mean score was on the Leadership and Responsibility scale on the YES instrument.

Practical Applications

Discussion: Current research reflects a trend to examine not only the outcomes of youth programs, but also the processes that lead to them (Dworkin, Larson, & Hansen, 2003; Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003). This study of 4-H camp counseling was unique in its attempt to describe camp counseling as an experience encompassing the pre-camp processes of training and planning, as well as the actual camp experience. The experience was described in terms of a

multifaceted view of participation that reflected significant intensity, duration, and breadth. This view of participation is important because Bronfenbrenner & Morris (1998) argued that if such activities are to be effective in enhancing development, they must take place on a regular basis, over an extended period of time, and become increasingly more complex. This certainly was evident in the camp counseling experience.

The 4-H camp counseling experience provides a rich context for positive youth development. 4-H camp counselors in this study developed teamwork and social skills, worked cooperatively with their peers, practiced a variety of leadership roles, assumed significant responsibilities, and developed initiative—all skills important for the workforce—and learned about themselves in the process. The longer the duration of their experience, the greater the amount of leadership and responsibility the camp counselors developed. Thus, the 4-H camp counseling experience provides the opportunities for teens to have “meaningful roles as contributors and originators,” and thus they can be expected to “develop the confidence, competence, connections, and character to lead healthy and productive lives” (Astroth, Brown, Poore, & Timm, 2002, p. 12). It is critical that resources be directed to programs that promote positive youth development. These findings should be communicated to a wide variety of stakeholders, including public officials. Furthermore, the results must be shared in order to obtain financial support that will ensure their continued availability.

An area that may need attention was found in the responses to the negative experience scales. Although the items had low mean scores, for one item—the presence of cliques—where over 50% of the respondents indicated this situation existed. Perhaps additional focus on team building prior to camp, purposeful mixing up of camp counselors from different school districts, and discussion of ethical questions prior to camp may help to address some of these negative experiences and lessen the potential for them to occur at camp. Another item needing attention was that of “controlling adults,” which was identified as a negative experience by more than 20% of the counselors. Such a situation warrants some discussion and generation of potential ways to address the issue in order to lessen this negative experience as well.

Recommendations: This research has pointed out several important implications for those who work with camp programs, including training for counselors and camping professionals. While these recommendations are most applicable for programs with volunteer camp counselors, they may have relevance for other camp programs and those programs that aim to promote opportunities for positive youth development. Camping specialists should develop resources targeted to camp youth educators, camp managers, seasonal camp staff, and adult volunteers who work with teen camp counselors based on the research findings. Several recommendations for practice should be considered.

1. Youth development professionals and volunteers who work with youth should be encouraged to embrace the understanding that to enhance positive youth development, including that of camp counselors, requires deliberate inclusion of principles of positive development. Efforts should be made to help youth development professionals, Extension administrators, county commissioners, legislators, 4-H and Extension advisory committees, donors, parents, and camp counselors themselves, to recognize that because of the nature and context of the camp counseling experience, it has unique opportunities to promote positive youth development.

2. The concepts of duration, intensity, and breadth should be considered when developing youth development programs, including those for camp counselors. Training needs to be provided for youth development professionals in order for them to understand the importance of the duration, intensity, and breadth components of positive youth development experiences.

3. Although not an exhaustive list, the components utilized to define breadth in this study including those of supervising campers, formal and informal teaching roles, and committee leadership and membership roles, can be used to analyze programs and to deliberately increase intensity and expand the breadth of the youth development experiences.

4. The potential to promote camp counseling as a workforce preparation experiences should be noted. Specifically, camp counseling helps youth to develop skills that are valued in our society today, particularly those of leadership skills, interpersonal skills, teamwork, and initiative. Facilitators can assist camp counselors in recognizing the importance of these skills. Framing camp counseling as workforce development may open up additional avenues for funding.

5. Areas where counselors identified negative experiences should be addressed through modifications to the training of counselors and the supervision provided by adults facilitating the camp program.

6. Youth development professionals must deliberately include a variety of interesting and challenging activities as part of the camp counseling experience. In doing so, the opportunity exists to increase the youth development benefits of the camp counseling experience.

It is difficult to put into words all of the positive youth development that occurs in camping programs but perhaps is best summed up on the American Camping Association website (ACA, 2003), which markets the camping research with their slogan of “camping does a kid a world of good.” This applies even to big kids, such as teenage camp counselors.

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