

“The Experience of a Lifetime”: Alumni Perceptions of the Development and Transfer of Life and Workforce Skills in the Ohio 4-H Camp Counselor Program

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Significant human and financial resources are invested in the Ohio 4-H camping program, and recently camping has been named one of the new priority areas. Recent research suggests that 4-H camp counselors develop important life skills (Brandt, 2005; Forsythe, Matysik, & Nelson, 2004; Garst & Johnson, 2003; McNeely, 2004; Purcell, 1996; Weese, 2002). However, findings related to career and workforce connections are mixed. Thus, additional study of outcomes of camp counselors appeared to be warranted.

How do 4-H camp counselors perceive their experience years after camp? What are the benefits of being a camp counselor? Those are questions that were answered in a recent research study of camp counselor alumni (Digby, 2005). The goals of the research were to examine the following areas from the alumni perspective: (a) their experiences as a 4-H camp counselor, (b) the life and workforce skills gained through their experience, (c) the impact the camp counselor experience had on their career choice, and (d) the unique aspects of being a 4-H camp counselor as compared to the rest of the 4-H experience.

This study used qualitative methods to collect data from individuals who had been 4-H camp counselors in Ohio. Four focus groups were used to collect data from a sample of 30 former counselors. Eighteen of Ohio's 88 counties were represented in the sample. The average age of the participants was 22 (ages ranged from 18 to 30), and the average number of years the alumni were counselors was four years.

Overall, alumni of the 4-H camp counselor program thought their experience was fun and enjoyable, yet challenging. They believed they developed important life and workforce skills needed for the 21st century. More specifically, decision making, planning and organizing, communication, interpersonal skills, teamwork, and leadership were skills most mentioned. The alumni believed that the camp counseling experience had both indirect and direct impacts on their choice of a career. Indirect impacts on a career choice included that alumni considered what type of job or work environment they would like in their future. Direct impacts were that alumni decided that they enjoyed working with children and looked for a career in working directly with children. Unique aspects of being a camp counselor compared to other experiences in 4-H were that camp takes place in a different environment where there is little competition. Camp counselors also have the opportunity to be role models and develop a sense of identity.

In conclusion, camp provides a developmental context for adolescents, as 4-H camp counselors, to thrive. The skills and qualities learned through this experience are transferred to other contexts of life such as student, employee, or community member. The development of these skills and qualities takes place in a fun environment, which is an often-overlooked dimension of youth programs in attracting and retaining youth participation.

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