

## **4-H Teens' Participation in Community Service Experiences: Motivations, Roles, and Outcomes**

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### **Abstract**

4-H teens were surveyed to examine their extent of involvement in and gains from their participation in community service activities. As expected, 4-H teens were highly involved in *doing* community service. Those involved in a greater number of community service projects were more likely to experience skill gains. However, the results of this study suggest that teens are less involved in some parts of the process than their adult advisers. In addition, the amount and type of their involvement is related to their skill development. A service-learning model, which incorporates opportunities for decision making, meaningful roles, and reflection, is recommended.

### **Introduction**

*Everybody can be great because anybody can serve.*  
Martin Luther King, Jr.

Community service is an integral part of the 4-H experience: Every time they recite the pledge, 4-H members pledge their “hands to larger service.” Recently, this commitment was evident through the Power of Youth campaign, where 4-H’ers around the country pledged to participate in over 1 million hours of service (National 4-H Council, 2004).

Adolescents who are involved in community groups and extracurricular activities are more likely to volunteer (McLellan & Youniss, 2003; Zaff, Moore, Papillo, & Williams, 2003). Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that 4-H’ers will have a high degree of involvement in volunteering and community service activities. Evidence from statewide and national studies points in this direction. Wisconsin leaders reported involvement in an average of five projects per group (Taylor-Powell, Hutchins, & Reed, 1997). In Ohio Safrit and Auck (2003) found that 98% of 4-H’ers had reported community service participation. Youth, parents, and volunteer leaders in

New York gave many examples of service (Gr9goire, 2004). Astroth and Haynes (2002) found that Montana 4-H'ers were more involved than non-members in activities that help other people. Nationally, youth reported community service as one of the top 10 ways that 4-H has changed their life (National 4-H Impact Assessment, 2001).

Youth development organizations aim to promote “Six Cs” in youth, one of which is *contribution*—to other people and to the community (Lerner, 2004; Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberg, 2000; Pittman, Irby, & Tolman, 2001). Therefore, it is important to understand to what degree youth are involved in the process of community service and what they gain from their participation. We designed this study to examine such issues.

## Review of Literature

Although there is a trend toward greater youth participation in community service (Flanagan & Faison, 2001; Sagawa, 1998), estimates vary widely. A national study of college freshman found that 73% had performed community service as high school seniors (Astin & Sax, 1998). However, other studies noted that only 50% of youth (Benson, Scales, Leffert, & Roehlkepartain, 1999) or less (Flanagan, Bowes, Jonsson, Csap, & Sheblanova, 1998; Gambone & Arbreton, 1997; Lopez, 2003; Zaff et al., 2003) participated in service or volunteering.

Although used interchangeably, *community service* and *service-learning* have somewhat different definitions. With community service, the emphasis is on service, with the recipient as the primary beneficiary. In contrast, service-learning is designed to benefit both the recipient and the provider, with an intentional link to an organized learning process (Furco, 2002). In essence, service-learning is a form of experiential learning. When combined, service and learning have a synergistic effect: Each informs the other, thus transforming both in the process (Honnet & Poulson, 1989). Although 4-H uses the term community service, there is evidence that, in practice, a service-learning model is often used (Hairston, 2004; Shumer, 2001). Greater gains have been reported with a service-learning approach (Stafford, Boyd, & Lindner, 2003).

Because it develops aspects of identity and areas of ability, service is considered a vehicle to enhance overall youth development (Shumer, 2001; Zeldin & Tarlov, 1997). Through participation in service experiences, youth may develop personal and interpersonal skills, develop civic and social responsibility, become more engaged in learning, and view themselves as making positive contributions to society (Billig, 2000; Grantmaker Forum for Community and National Service, 2000; Youniss & Yates, 1997). Community service, combined with tutoring and life skills, has been shown to decrease rates of school failure and teen pregnancy (Allen, Philliber, Herrling, & Kuperminc, 1997). Involvement in volunteer service is associated with academic performance during high school and an increased likelihood of college attendance (Eccles & Barber, 1999). Furthermore, participation at a young age is associated with later involvement, both in the short term (e.g., from middle to high school; McIntosh, Schmidt, & Chang, 2001) and as an adult (Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997; Van Horn, 2001).

Service programs must be high quality to produce results. Numerous authors have written about factors contributing to effective service experiences (Furco, 2002; Glenn & Hergert, 2002;

Honnet & Paulson, 1989; Kielsmeier & Klopp, 2002; Martin, 2001; Youniss & Yates, 1997; Zeldin & Tarlov, 1997). These components include:

1. Clear goals and adequate preparation
2. Youth participation in decision making
3. Active participation in meaningful activities
4. Opportunity for reflection

Youth are more likely to benefit from activities that they find engaging and that require considerable concentration and skills (Larson, 2000). The opportunity to reflect on and process the experience appears to be one of the most powerful components of service-learning (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000).

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to understand 4-H teens' involvement in community service. Specifically, we wanted to examine:

1. Number and types of projects
2. Motivations for participation
3. Roles in the project
4. Relationships fostered between youth and adults
5. Skills and understanding gained

Furthermore, we wanted to examine relationships among the number of projects, the number of gains, and other aspects of community service participation. Presumably, those who participated in more in-depth experiences would experience greater gains.

### **Method**

This was designed as a descriptive correlational study. The instrument used was adapted from a survey developed at the University of Wisconsin (Taylor-Powell, Boyd, & Hermann, 2001). A pilot study was conducted with a group of teen leaders (Fogt, 2001). Teens were questioned about their involvement in a range of possible community service activities. They were then asked to select one activity and to use that activity as the frame of reference for the remaining questions. In addition, qualitative data were obtained through open-ended questions.

Descriptive statistics were computed for all variables. Previous research led us to examine potential differences based on level of participation (Chaput, 2004). Qualitative data were reviewed for common themes using an open coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

### **Participants**

We assumed that 4-H teens are involved in community service, and we wanted to find out more about the nature of those experiences. Thus, we chose to survey those teens most likely to have

community service involvement. The sample consisted of participants attending a state 4-H leadership camp ( $n=105$ ). Demographics are reported in Table 1.

<b>Table 1</b>	
<b>Participant Characteristics</b>	
<b>(<math>n= 105</math>)</b>	
<b>Age</b>	
Range	14 to 19 years old
Mean	16.5 years ( $SD=1.1$ )
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	78%
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>	
White	99%
<b>Residence</b>	
Farm	49%
Rural	27%
Town	16%
Suburb or city	9%
<b>Years in 4-H</b>	
Range	3 to 11 years
8 or more years	70%

## Results

### Types of Community Service Projects

Teens reported their participation in a variety of projects, summarized in Table 2. On average, youth participated in four community service projects a year ( $M=3.98$ ,  $SD=2.15$ ). One quarter (24%) reported doing the same project each year.

<b>Table 2</b>	
<b>Participation in Community Service Projects</b>	
<b>Types of Community Service Projects</b>	<b>Level of Participation</b>
Picking up trash	58%
Planting flowers	51%
Raising funds	48%
Other community service project	42%
Donating food	40%
Visiting nursing home	37%
Walking/running for a cause	22%

<b>Types of Community Service Projects</b>	<b>Level of Participation</b>
Organizing a petting zoo	16%
Mentoring	16%
Passing out fliers	13%
Babysitting	12%
Reading/tutoring	12%
Working with Habitat for Humanity	3%
<i>Note: Teens could check all responses that applied</i>	

Teens' most meaningful community service experiences could be classified in multiple ways. The projects had a variety of target audiences (e.g., youth, families, elderly, soldiers, homeless, individuals with disabilities). Others did not involve people directly, but involved a physical location in the community such as a park. Another way to classify the service experiences was based on the nature of the work itself. Four general categories emerged: (a) physical work, such as planting flowers; (b) collecting tangible resources (items such as food, clothing, or money) or making items (quilts); (c) organizing an event for others to participate in, such as a party or a camp; and (d) building relationships (mentoring and visiting). A subset of activities involved animals, such as taking animals to a nursing home or a organizing a horse camp. Thus, teens' experiences were varied.

### **Motivation for Participation**

Teens were motivated to participate in community service for a variety of reasons, which are presented in Table 3. They gave an average of five reasons for participating in these projects ( $M=4.82$ ,  $SD=2.7$ ). About three-quarters of the teens chose three responses as their primary motivation: helping others, club decision, and fun.

<b>Reasons for Participation</b>	<b>Percent Responding "Yes"</b>
Help others	77%
Club decision	77%
Fun	74%
Learn something	57%
College application	49%
Adviser wanted teen to do it	48%
Scholarship or award	30%
Parent wanted teen to do it	29%
Friends' involvement	29%
School or class credit	16%
Other	11%

<b>Table 3</b>	
<b>Reasons for Participating in Community Service Projects</b>	
<b>Reasons for Participation</b>	<b>Percent Responding “Yes”</b>
<i>Note:</i> Teens could check all responses that applied Responses = “no” or “yes”	

### **Involvement in the Community Service Process**

Teens reported on their level of involvement, as well as adults’ involvement, in five phases of community service (Table 4). Teens were most involved in the implementation phase. In implementing as well as decision making, teens were more involved than advisers were. Club advisers were more involved in planning and evaluating. Both groups were low in reporting.

<b>Table 4</b>		
<b>Type of Involvement in Community Service Projects</b>		
<b>Involvement in Phases of Community Service Project</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	
	<b>Teen’s Involvement</b>	<b>Adviser’s Involvement</b>
Decision Making	69%	61%
Planning	65%	75%
Implementing	98%	74%
Evaluating	46%	63%
Reporting	33%	26%
<i>Note:</i> Teens could check all responses that applied. Responses = “no” or “yes”		

Responses across the five phases were summed to illustrate the level of involvement within a community service project (Table 5). Both teens and adults were involved in an average of three phases of the process.

<b>Table 5</b>		
<b>Level of Teen and Adviser Involvement in Community Service Projects</b>		
<b>Number of Phases of Involvement</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	
	<b>Teen</b>	<b>Adviser</b>
0	0%	14%
1	12%	5%

<b>Table 5</b>		
<b>Level of Teen and Adviser Involvement in Community Service Projects</b>		
<b>Number of Phases of Involvement</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	
	<b>Teen</b>	<b>Adviser</b>
2	25%	9%
3	27%	30%
4	16%	26%
5	20%	17%

The open-ended responses provided insight into strategies used in each phase. These comments are summarized in Table 6.

<b>Table 6</b>	
<b>Strategies Reported in Teens' Descriptions of 4-H Community Service Projects</b>	
<b>Phase of Project</b>	<b>Strategies Reported<sup>a</sup></b>
Decision Making	-Giving opinions or suggestions -Discussing options -Using committees -Voting
Planning	-Organizing details -Time and place (e.g., what time, where to go, where to stay, how to get there – transportation) -Things (such as supplies, food, decorations, animals) -Activities (e.g., songs to sing, things to do) -People (e.g., getting a team together) -Making phone calls -Discussing
Implementing	(Varied depending on project; see types of projects, Table 2)
Evaluating	-Discussing what happened (e.g., what went well, what to change)
Reporting	-Written (e.g., newspaper articles, flyers) -Verbal (e.g., informally by word of mouth, more formally by giving a report or speech)
<sup>a</sup> Based on teens' open-ended responses	

### Teen and Adult Working Relationships

Many teens reported positive working relationships with adults (Table 7). However, only one-third indicated that they worked differently with adults. Furthermore, only about one-fourth of the teens reported that adults afforded them meaningful roles (i.e., giving responsibility, asking for ideas, involving in decisions).

<b>Table 7</b> <b>Teen and Adult Working Relationships</b>	
<b>Relationship Aspect</b>	<b>Percent Responding “Yes”</b>
Comfortable working with adults	57%
Met new adults	56%
Teen works differently with adults	33%
Adult gives teen responsibility	30%
Teen more confident with adults	27%
Adult asks for teen’s ideas	25%
Adults and teens listen and talk more to each other	24%
Teen more involved with decision making	23%
<i>Note:</i> Teens could check all responses that applied. Responses = “no” or “yes”	

### Type of Learning Resulting from Participation

Most teens reported that they understood others’ needs because of their participation (Table 8). About half of the teens gained confidence working on community problems. However, only one-fourth indicated that they learned about the community and met community leaders.

<b>Table 8</b> <b>Learning from Community Service Projects</b>	
<b>Learning Area</b>	<b>Learned “A lot”</b>
Understood the needs of others	78%
Gained confidence working on community problems	52%
Learned to solve community needs	45%
Learned about diversity & community issues	39%
Gained new skills	39%
Learned about the community	27%
Met community leaders	26%
<i>Note:</i> Teens could check all responses that applied. Responses = “not much,” “some,” “a lot”	

### New Skills Learned

Teens reported that social skills and organizational skills were what they learned the most (Table 9). Less than one-third noted that they learned “a lot” of evaluation and public speaking skills. In open-ended responses, teens said that the most important things they gained were from working with others.

<b>Skills</b>	<b>Learned “A lot”</b>
Communicating with adults	62%
Completing a project	58%
Getting along with others who are different	56%
Team working skills	55%
Group communication skills	54%
Planning and organizational skills	51%
Decision making skills	51%
Setting goals	43%
Problem solving skills	36%
Public speaking skills	30%
Evaluation skills	28%
<i>Note:</i> Teens could check all responses that applied. Responses = “not much,” “some,” “a lot”	

### Gains Related to Participation

Teens reported an average of 10 gains related to attitudes and skills ( $M=10.46$ ,  $SD=4.84$ ). Overwhelmingly, they felt good about their community service involvement and thought that it was fun (Table 10). The greatest gains were personal (i.e., feeling good, having fun, and making a difference), as well as those associated with working as a group.

<b>Areas of Gain</b>	<b>Percent Responding “Yes”</b>
Felt good about community service involvement	91%
Had fun	87%
Learned to work in a group	79%
I can make a difference in the community	78%
Became more understanding of others	72%
Can make a difference working as a group	66%

<b>Areas of Gain</b>	<b>Percent Responding “Yes”</b>
Community project is hard work	65%
Learned projects take time	58%
Felt comfortable working with adults	56%
Made new teenage friends	55%
Better prepared to do work on other community projects	55%
Made important decisions	55%
Met new adults	55%
Became more interested in community	49%
Learned about diverse community population	49%
Met community leaders	40%
Learned about finances and budget	40%
Other gains	10%
Did not gain anything	9%
<i>Note:</i> Teens could check all responses that applied. Responses = “no” or “yes”	

In their open-ended responses, teens characterized the ways that the project helped the community: The community looked better physically (cleaner) or socially (safer), and people felt better. They also perceived that by their doing the service, the community would gain a more positive view of young people. Teens wanted more people to become involved.

### **Relationships Between Phase of Involvement and Related Skills**

We found that there was a relationship between whether the teens participated in a particular phase of the community service process and the development of a specific skill identified with that phase of involvement (Table 11).

<b>Phase of Involvement and Related Skill</b>	<b>Test of Significance</b>
Participation in planning related to planning skills	$\chi = 11.236, df = 2, p = .004$
Participation in evaluating related to evaluation skills	$\chi = 9.737, df = 2, p = .008$
Participation in publicizing related to public speaking skills	$\chi = 15.188, df = 2, p = .001$

## **Breadth of Community Service Experience**

The number of community service projects was used to represent breadth of involvement. There were a number of significant correlations. Youth who engaged in more service experiences were more likely to learn about the community, to improve teamwork skills, and to report a greater number of gains from their experience. Those who gained more also were more likely to report more reasons for participation. Teens who reported that they learned about the community and its needs were more likely to have gained new skills, developed more confidence in working on community issues, learned to set goals, and met community leaders.

## **Discussion**

This study examined the extent of involvement in and gains from 4-H teens' participation in community service activities. As expected, they were highly involved in *doing* community service. This is an important finding, as other studies have shown that the proportion of youth involved in community service is lower than desired (Gambone & Arbreton, 1997). Michelsen, Zaff, and Hair's (2002) review suggested that the ready availability of community service opportunities might increase actual participation.

4-H teens had multiple motivations for their involvement. Reasons given were similar to those for other structured youth activities, including factors such as perceptions of fun and enjoyment and learning new skills and getting better (Ferrari, Anderson-Butcher, & Jackson, 2003; Fredricks, Alfeld-Liro, Hruda, Eccles, Ryan & Patrick, 2002; Turner, 2002; Weiss & Ferrer-Caja, 2000). However, unlike other activities, "helping others" was a reason that motivated participation in service-related activities, also documented in other studies (e.g., Youniss & Yates, 1997). Thus, service activities represent a unique context for youth development.

The joint involvement of youth and adults in all phases of community service suggests formation of youth-adult partnerships. Although the projects gave youth opportunities to interact with adults, it was surprising that more teens did not indicate improvement in working relationships with them. Youth involved in the projects evaluated by Taylor-Powell et al. (2001) indicated greater gains in this area. However, that study included youth in 11 specific grant-funded projects, whereas the youth in our study selected which project to use as their frame of reference. It may be that teens in our study already had good working relationships with adults, thus leaving little room for improvement. On the other hand, adult advisers were involved in some areas more than the teens. While adult involvement is important, it also is important that they approach their role as one of granting autonomy rather than exercising control (Astroth, 1996). This is a delicate balance; adults may need to step back to allow youth to take ownership but also know when to step in to offer guidance (Camino, 2000; Larson, Hansen, & Walker, in press). It is important to remember that youth voice is crucial in general (Zeldin, Topitzes, McDaniel, & Calvert, 2001) and specifically to the overall effectiveness of service programs (Learning in Deed, 2001).

The vast majority of teens gained from their participation. While some skills were gained by a large proportion of the teens, others were not. Teens felt that they had not greatly improved their public speaking or evaluation skills. Taylor-Powell et al. (2001) reported similar results. Reasons for this may include the specific nature of the service project as well as limited involvement in

some parts of the process. Another possibility is that these older 4-H members may already be quite skilled, a result reported by Kolodinsky, Cranwell, and Rowe (2002); different results might be obtained with a younger, and presumably less skilled, group. Repeating projects from year to year, as indicated by about one-fourth of the teens, may be another reason. While this might make the project easier to do, it could also make it boring (Fogt, 2001).

Only a few teens did not gain anything. The community service activities must be motivating and interesting if teens are to achieve the benefits of participation (Scales, Blyth, Berkas, & Keilsmeier, 2000). Meaningful activities of sufficient duration and appropriate structure are needed (Alt & Medrich, 1994; McClellan & Youniss, 2003; Scales et al., 2000). Lacking this meaning, youth may view their service as “cheap labor” (Hairston, 2004). Furthermore, Covitt (2002) cautioned that if programs are implemented in ways that do not reflect best practices, they actually might have negative impacts on students’ motivations and no impact on civic outcomes.

The results of this study suggest that teens are less involved in some parts of the process than others, and that the amount and type of their involvement is related to their skill development. The finding that number of projects was positively related to gains in understanding of the community and teamwork skills is logical. Other studies of service-learning found that intensity of participation matters (Moore & Allen, 1996). Similarly, studies of after-school program participation have found that length of time and the variety of experiences offered could affect outcomes (Miller, 2003).

Teens who reported that they learned about the community and its needs were more likely to have gained new skills; however, this learning was one of the lowest frequencies reported. Knowledge of the community is an important component of civic identity (Atkins & Hart, 2003). Thus, youth may be missing important opportunities to gain from their service experiences.

### **Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

This study used a convenience sample of youth surveyed at one point in time; therefore, we cannot generalize beyond the study sample. Studies with a more diverse group would be desirable. However, we built upon studies that simply ask about involvement and looked more deeply at the processes involved in community service experiences. This approach should be continued.

Additional questions to obtain the frequency, duration, and breadth of engagement in community service experiences would be beneficial. This recommendation is congruent with recent calls to examine participation from a multi-dimensional perspective (Chaput, 2004; Yohalem, Wilson-Ahlstrom, & Pittman, 2004). Teens considered a wide variety of projects to be meaningful. More in-depth exploration of the meaningful nature of these activities also would be interesting. Using written reflections as a data source could provide such rich information (Hairston, 2004).

The benefits reported here are those that are more tangible (i.e., skill related). It has also been noted that service learning is a means to reach youth development goals, including identity development (Youniss, McLellan, Su, & Yates, 1999; Youniss & Yates, 1997; Zeldin & Tarlov,

1997). Therefore, the inclusion of such measures in future studies would allow for a more direct assessment of these goals. This recommendation is bolstered by recent studies that have found that youth experienced youth development outcomes through participation in organized activities (Dworkin, Hansen, & Larson, 2003; Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003).

### **Conclusions and Implications**

This study demonstrated that 4-H provides an opportunity for significant involvement in community service. Thus, 4-H provides a “social network” (McLellan & Youniss, 2003, p. 49) in which service occurs. These projects provided tangible benefits to communities while serving as a developmental context for the youth who participated in them. It was encouraging to note that teens wanted to continue their involvement in community service.

Not all service experiences are alike. Nor are the outcomes from community service automatic. Understanding what constitutes effective practices in community service is important. If 4-H and other youth organizations are to continue encouraging participation, youth development professionals must understand what motivates youth and use this information when designing and implementing programs.

Teens selected a wide range of projects as meaningful to them. Thus, there is no one “right” project that should be promoted, and there are many routes to positive development. Although projects must be interesting and meaningful, it seems that how one experiences the project is as important as the project itself.

The five aspects of community service examined in this study are consistent with a service-learning model. Considering that youth in this study indicated less involvement in some areas, intentionally adopting such a model could promote more active youth involvement in under-represented areas. Moreover, greater breadth of engagement could result in greater personal growth and commitment to community involvement. In-service training for youth professionals and volunteers could help to promote adoption of effective practices.

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