# Status of Community Service-Learning in 4-H Programs

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## INTRODUCTION/THEORETICAL BASE

A major part of a 4-H club for youth is participation in community service-learning activities through project work, either on an individual basis or as a group with fellow club members (Mullen, S., personal communication, November 17, 1998). Community service-learning by 4-H youth is certainly not a new concept. It is such a strong part of the 4-H program that sometimes it is overlooked or presumed to be a natural part of the learning process in 4-H Youth Development. While community service-learning has recently become popular in the world of "formal" education, it has clearly been an objective of 4-H for many years.

There is much debate over how the service should be rendered and who should benefit from it. At the center of this debate are two issues. The first issue is what exactly should be the purpose of community service-learning. Should community service-learning be a tool to encourage and increase volunteer hours by youth. Or should it be the vehicle that transports the participants to a state of being aware of personal, intellectual, and social value of themselves to the community. The second issue is who should be held responsible for teaching about civic and community involvement. Should it be educational institutions, civic organizations and extracurricular clubs, or all of them (Shumar, 1987)?

Community service is currently a hot topic because youth are often perceived as selfish, or self-serving. Yet, research shows that young people are eager, hungry, and enthusiastic about serving their respective communities (Kendall, 1990).

Often, little distinction is made between community service and community service-learning. However, community service and community service-learning are two distinct concepts. Community service is volunteering done in the community without any structured or formal attachment to the outcomes. The focus here is on the program itself and not on the learning outcomes of the participants, although the possibility of participants learning while volunteering certainly does exist (Perkins, 1994).

Service-learning, on the other hand, is a 20-year-old approach to experiential education which developed out of concerns expressed in the 1960's and 1970's for active, experiential learning opportunities related to community service, community development, and social change. One definition of service-learning is the combining of structured, intentional learning with public and community service (Stanton, 1987). In emphasizing the accomplishment of tasks which meet human needs in combination with conscious educational growth, service learning is the crossing point between theory and practice, and self and society (Goodlad, 1988). It expresses a commitment that sees knowledge developed out of social practice (Kendall, 1990).

Opportunities for young people to serve stimulate skills that one would not readily think of, but yet, skills necessary for future employment. These skills include punctuality, reliability, responsibility for task completion, getting along with peers, and personal development (Harrison, 1987).

Involving young people in community affairs, including community service-learning projects, can build strong, positive relationships between students, teachers, and citizens in a community, while helping to improve the conditions and solve the problems of their community. Youth can also increase their understanding of their community, while also increasing their commitment to their community. Furthermore, they can become empowered to work toward solving local problems (Israel & Ilvento, 1995).

Research shows concrete evidence that the need for young people to serve their communities is a true win-win situation. A Search Institute study of 47,000 young people in grades six through twelve found that those youth who served at least one hour per week in a community service-learning activity were less likely to engage in at-risk behaviors (Benson, 1993). Furthermore, it has also been found that experience during a youth's adolescence helps to shape values throughout that young person's life, suggesting that early participation in community service-learning activities results in long-term rewards such as a lower school drop out rates, lower percentages of teen pregnancy, and lower rates of behavioral problems (Conrad & Hedin, 1986).

A study conducted by the Florida Department of Education provided data supporting improvements in three critical areas by the 20,000 students involved in community service-learning activities through school. Those areas that were positively affected included grades, attendance, and discipline (Follman, 1996).

Research continues to show that community service-learning programs can assist young people in developing a better understanding of their community, themselves, and their role as a citizen. Participation in these activities can increase the participant's self-confidence, as well as their confidence in contributing to society. While participation in community service-learning activities is not the only means of meeting the necessary conditions for creating involved citizens, it remains a vital part in that process.

While 4-H youth have always been involved in countless hours of community service-learning projects and activities, no studies have been conducted of community-service learning as conducted in 4-H programs. With new initiatives being taken by the National 4-H Council to involve more youth in community service-learning, and with the potential to strengthen 4-H youth development programs, a need exists to determine the status of community-service learning in 4-H programs.

## PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this study was to determine the status of community service-learning in Louisiana 4-H programs. The research questions addressed in this study included:

1. How can community service-learning in 4-H be described using the following selected characteristics: type of activity, number of times activities occurred, frequency of activity, and number of participants by school level?
2. What value do extension 4-H agents perceive community service-learning activities has for participants?
3. What process is used by extension 4-H agents for planning and implementing community service-learning activities?
4. What do extension 4-H agents perceive as the capability of 4-H members to initiate and participate in the planning process for community service-learning activities?
5. What do extension 4-H agents perceive as their own training needs in the area of community service-learning?
6. How can extension 4-H agents who coordinate community service-learning activities be described using selected demographic characteristics(age, years of experience as an extension 4-H agent, undergraduate studies, and whether or not formal training has been received in the area of community service-learning)?
7. Do relationships exist between the value of community service-learning as perceived by extension 4-H agents and the following demographic characteristics of the agents: age, years of experience as an extension 4-H agent, and formal training received in the area of community service-learning?

## PROCEDURES

### Population

The target population was 123 extension agents employed with the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service whose primary job responsibility was the development of youth enrolled in the 4-H Youth Development Program and who had at least one year of experience with the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service. A census of 4-H extension agents was taken.

## Instrumentation

An instrument was available from a similar study recently conducted by the Wisconsin Cooperative Extension Service (Taylor-Powell, 1997). The instrument from the Wisconsin study did not meet the needs of this study but did serve as a foundation for the instrument for this study. Additional input was provided by state 4-H staff, extension agents, and departmental faculty. This input along with concepts and information taken from the review of the literature was used to design the final draft.

The validation panel included three members of the university faculty and the Director of the Governor's Office of Service-Learning, who recently completed a thesis in the area of community service-learning. This panel evaluated the content and face validity of the instrument. Their comments and suggestions were incorporated into the final survey instrument.

The survey instrument was field tested with ten extension agents who had prior experience in 4-H Youth Development, but were no longer doing such work. No major concerns were identified as a result of the field test, therefore, no significant changes were made to the instrument as a result of the field test.

Internal consistency was calculated for the four scales included in the survey instrument. The first scale was a cluster of 11 items designed to measure the perceived value of service-learning. The internal consistency of this scale was calculated as $\underline{a}$ = .91. The second scale, a cluster of nine items designed to measure the planning process used for service-learning activities, had an internal consistency of $\underline{a}$ = .88. The internal consistency for the third scale was $\underline{a}$ = .87. This cluster of 12 items was designed to measure the perceived capability of youth to participate in service-learning planning. The fourth scale, a cluster of eight items, was designed to measure the training needs of extension agents to coordinate service-learning activities. This scale had an internal consistency of $\underline{a}$ = .82.

## Data Collection

A letter was sent by the Division Leader for 4-H Youth Development within the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service to notify extension agents about the survey instrument and to indicate that both the Division Leader and Director of the Cooperative Extension Service requested that agents complete and return the survey instrument. Two mailings (instrument with cover letter), three interspersed e-mail messages, and a telephone follow-up were used to collect the data. These procedures resulted in a 95.1`% response rate (117 out of 123).

## Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used for objectives one through six. Spearman and Pearson correlation coefficients were used for objective seven.

FINDINGS

Research question one was designed to provide a benchmark of the community service-learning activities ongoing in Louisiana 4-H clubs.  The description was provided from the agents' perspectives, so it was realized that not every activity conducted at the club level could be reported.  What was sought, however, was a summation of the type of activities and the number of 4-H members involved in these activities.

Eighty-seven (87) respondents (N=117) completed Section 6 of the survey instrument, which requested information describing current community service-learning activities.  A total of 415 service-learning activities were reported by the respondents as being conducted 2,182 times during the year.  These activities involved 28,208 students at the elementary school level, 14,388 at the junior high level, and 12,193 students at the high school level.  It should be noted that virtually all 4-H clubs in Louisiana are school based.

Research question two addressed the issue of the respondents' perceptions of the value of community service-learning.  Responses were reported using a four point scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, and 4=Strongly Agree).  From this cluster of items, the respondents indicated a belief that community service-learning activities were valuable to 4-H youth who participated in such activities (Table 1).  Over 94% indicated that they strongly agreed or agreed that community service-learning activities were an important part of 4-H.  Almost all (99.1%) strongly agreed or agreed that community service-learning activities increased the participants' understanding of their community.

Research question three addressed the extent to which extension 4-H agents currently used the elements in the planning process for community service-learning activities.  Responses were reported using a four point scale (1=Never, 2=Rarely, 3=Sometimes, and 4=Always).  The question also identified agencies and organizations used as partners in community service-learning activities.  Most of the respondents (95 or 81.2%) indicated that participants and coordinators were sometimes or always assigned responsibilities during the planning process for community service-learning activities. However, only 53.9% indicated that time for reflection was always or sometimes included at the completion of community service-learning activities.  Approximately 88% of the respondents indicated that other groups and organizations were identified and used as partners for community service-learning activities.  While some steps of the planning process for community service-learning were being utilized, the entire process was rarely conducted.

The respondents were also assigned a score from 9 (never used any of the nine planning elements) to 36 (always used all nine of the planning elements) based on their responses to this cluster of items.  Twelve respondents scored 18 points or less, which indicated they rarely or never used the planning process.  Only thirty-five respondents (30.0%) scored from 28 to 36 points, which indicated that they used most or all of the planning process steps.

Research question four included a cluster of twelve items designed to address the agents' perceptions of 4-H members' capability to participate in the planning process for community service-learning activities.  Responses were reported using a four point scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, and 4=Strongly Agree).  As a group, the respondents generally

indicated a strong belief that youth were capable of participating in the planning process and were capable of giving input to selecting community service-learning activities (Table 2). A total of 110 respondents, or 94.0%, strongly agreed or agreed that 4-H members were capable of initiating ideas for community service-learning activities. In contrast, only 59.0% strongly agreed or agreed that 4-H members should be allowed unlimited input. Approximately three-fourths strongly agreed or agreed that 4-H members were excited about opportunities to serve their communities, were able to identify potential agencies and/or organizations as potential partners, and were capable of developing objectives and methods of reflection for community service-learning activities.

Table 1
Perceived Value of Community Service-learning by Extension 4-H Agents

| Statement | Agreed or strongly agreed | | M | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | f | % | | |
| Participating in Community Service-learning activities help participants gain a better understanding of their community and issues facing society. | 116 | 99.1 | 3.6 | 0.5 |
| Community Service-learning has a positive impact on 4-H members. | 114 | 97.4 | 3.4 | 0.6 |
| Community Service-learning activities increase the knowledge of 4-H youth about their community. | 112 | 95.7 | 3.4 | 0.6 |
| Community Service-learning activities increase the participants' human relations skills. | 112 | 95.7 | 3.3 | 0.6 |
| Community Service-learning activities are an important aspect of 4-H youth programs. | 111 | 94.8 | 3.4 | 0.6 |
| Community Service-learning activities increase participants' self-confidence. | 108 | 92.3 | 3.3 | 0.6 |
| Community Service-learning activities increase the participants' initiative to take an active role in their community. | 106 | 90.6 | 3.2 | 0.6 |
| Community Service-learning activities are an important part of the educational process. | 105 | 89.7 | 3.2 | 0.6 |
| Community Service-learning participants are less likely to engage in at-risk behaviors such as crime, school suspension, dropping out of school, drugs, alcohol, etc. | 102 | 87.2 | 3.2 | 0.6 |
| Community Service-learning should be stressed more in 4-H. | 92 | 78.7 | 3.1 | 0.7 |
| Community Service-learning activities are more valuable to the participant's experience than community service activities. | 74 | 63.2 | 2.8 | 0.8 |
| Grand Mean | | | 3.3 | 0.5 |

The cluster of items for Research Question Five were designed to determine the

respondents' perceptions of their own training needs. Responses were reported using a four point scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, and 4=Strongly Agree). Approximately one-third (35.9%) strongly agreed or agreed that they were familiar with recent research on community service-learning (Table 3). Over 71% indicated an interest in additional training. In addition, 86.3% strongly agreed or agreed that training would improve the quality of 4-H community service-learning activities.

Table 2
Capability of Youth to Participate in Community Service-learning Planning, as Perceived by Extension 4-H Agents

| Statement | Agreed or strongly agreed | | M | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | f | % | | |
| 4-H members in my parish are capable of initiating ideas for Community Service-learning activities. | 110 | 94.0 | 3.2 | 0.6 |
| 4-H members in my parish are capable of participating in the planning process for implementing Community Service-learning activities. | 109 | 93.1 | 3.3 | 0.6 |
| 4-H members in my parish are capable of participating on a Community Service-learning Advisory Committee. | 109 | 93.1 | 3.2 | 0.5 |
| 4-H members in my parish are willing to participate in a planning process to select Community Service-learning activities. | 100 | 85.5 | 3.0 | 0.6 |
| 4-H members in my parish are capable of identifying potential groups to partner in efforts for Community Service-learning activities. | 95 | 81.2 | 2.9 | 0.6 |
| 4-H members in my parish are capable of developing objectives for a Community Service-learning activity. | 93 | 79.5 | 2.9 | 0.6 |
| 4-H members in my parish are excited by the opportunity to give input when selecting and planning Community Service-learning activities. | 89 | 76.1 | 2.9 | 0.6 |
| 4-H members in my parish are capable of developing a method of reflection for a Community Service-learning activity. | 88 | 75.2 | 2.8 | 0.5 |
| 4-H members in my parish are capable of assessing and identifying resources available to conduct a Community Service-learning activity. | 86 | 73.5 | 2.8 | 0.6 |
| 4-H members in my parish are capable of conducting a needs assessment within a community to identify needs for Community Service-learning activities. | 73 | 62.4 | 2.6 | 0.7 |
| 4-H members in my parish are self-motivated enough to initiate and conduct Community Service-learning activities. | 70 | 59.8 | 2.6 | 0.7 |
| 4-H members in my parish should be allowed unlimited input into planning Community Service-learning activities. | 69 | 59.0 | 2.7 | 0.8 |
| Grand Mean | | | 2.9 | 0.4 |

Table 3

Extension 4-H Agents' Assessments of Training Needs for Coordinating Community Service-Learning Activities

| Statement from Survey Instrument | Agreed or strongly agreed | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | f | % | M | SD |
| I believe that 4-H Agent training will improve the quality of Community Service-learning activities in 4-H. | 101 | 86.3 | 3.2 | 0.7 |
| I am interested in additional training on how to develop and implement Community Service-learning activities. | 84 | 71.8 | 2.9 | 0.8 |
| I believe I am knowledgeable enough to coordinate a planning process for a Community Service-learning activity. | 84 | 71.8 | 2.8 | 0.7 |
| I believe I am adequately trained to conduct Community Service-learning activities. | 82 | 70.1 | 2.8 | 0.7 |
| I believe I am adequately trained to Coordinate Community Service-learning activities. | 78 | 66.7 | 2.8 | 0.7 |
| I believe I am knowledgeable enough to coordinate a needs assessment for Community Service-learning activities. | 71 | 60.7 | 2.7 | 0.7 |
| I believe I am adequately trained to involve and train volunteers to conduct Community Service-learning activities. | 62 | 52.9 | 2.5 | 0.8 |
| I am familiar with recent research on the impact of Community Service-learning activities. | 42 | 35.9 | 2.3 | 0.8 |
| Grand Mean | | | 2.7 | 0.5 |

Research question six was designed to describe the respondents based on age, years of experience with Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service, undergraduate major, and whether or not any formal training in the area of community service-learning had been received. The age of the respondents ranged from 22 to 60 with a mean of 39.0 years ($SD$=13.9). Years of experience ranged from one year to 31 years with a mean of 10.0 years ($SD$=8.1).

The majority of respondents indicated their undergraduate major was Animal Science. This group included 32, or 27.4%, of the respondents. The other most frequently reported undergraduate majors were Vocational Home Economics Education, which had 27 responses (23.1%), and Home Economics with 21 responses (17.9%). In the "Other" category, undergraduate majors included Elementary Education, Family Services, Biology, Environmental Science, Consumer Affairs, Science Education, and Business Management.

The respondents were also asked to indicate whether or not any formal training in the area of community service-learning had been received. Only 15, or 12.8%, indicated they had received some type of formal training in the area of community service-learning.

The seventh research question attempted to describe what relationship existed between the respondents' perceptions of the value of community service-learning and selected demographic characteristics. Spearman and Pearson correlation coefficients were used to

describe any existing relationships between the demographic characteristics and the perception of the value toward community service-learning. The interpretation of the correlation coefficients was based on the set of descriptors by Davis (1971): .01 to .09 –negligible association; .10 to .29 – low association; .30 to .49 – moderate association; .50 to .69 –substantial association; and .70 or higher – very strong association. Since this was a population census, statistical tests were not used.

No practically significant correlation was found between the perceived value of community service-learning and age or amount of formal training. There was a low association between the perceived value and the years of experience, indicating that as the years of experience increased, the agents' perceptions of community service-learning's value decreased.

## CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS/IMPLICATIONS

A substantial drop in the number of participants occurred between the elementary and high school level. The researcher concluded that drop in number of participants was indicative of the decrease in 4-H membership at the high school level. Perhaps, however, there may be an increase in the percentage of those 4-H members participating in community service-learning at the high school level from the elementary level. It is recommended that a study using 4-H volunteer leaders as the target population be done to get a better assessment of the actual ongoing activities and factors related to 4-H member participation.

A large percentage of 4-H club members are involved in some type of service activities. Furthermore, more specific detail and information about service-learning activities should be compiled from volunteer leaders, since most of these activities are occurring at the local club level. While more studies are being done on community service-learning, there is still much that can be gained from further studies dealing specifically with 4-H. The extension 4-H agents are presently coordinating an entire parish program and perhaps are not as aware of community service-learning activities on the individual club level as previously thought by the researcher. Presently, there are materials available from the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service office which describe in detail community service-learning and the necessary criteria for such activities Extension 4-H agents, especially those recently employed, need to be made aware of, or reminded, that these materials are available for use in planning community service-learning programs.

The 4-H agents perceived the value of community service-learning to the participant to be substantial. The respondents indicated a strong belief that these activities contribute to an increased involvement and understanding of their community by the 4-H members and that community service-learning is a valuable tool for 4-H. Extension agents believe that involvement in community service-learning activities reduces the participants' chances of at-risk behavior. It is recommended that this information be used to promote service-learning in 4-H. The information from this study shows strong support for these activities.

While some steps of the planning process for community service-learning are being utilized, the entire process is rarely conducted. 4-H clubs are doing a substantial job partnering with outside agencies and/or organizations. Advisory committees are not being utilized as much as they should be. A general recommendation is that field staff with responsibility in 4-H Youth

Development be made aware of, or reminded, of materials developed by the state 4-H staff which provide detailed information on the planning process. It is also recommended that agents should use their advisory committees more. In particular, the committee should be used to identify community needs through a needs assessment and should be used to select community service-learning activities.

Extension 4-H agents feel that 4-H members should be more involved with selecting and planning community service-learning activities, including identifying partners, needs assessment, and developing objectives. It is recommended that extension 4-H agents be encouraged to get more youth involved in needs assessment, partnering, and other entities of the planning process. From this cluster of items, the study indicated that extension 4-H agents have confidence in the 4-H members' abilities to participate in the planning and implementing process. A study of the volunteer leaders' perceptions of this capability would be necessary to further develop extensive community service-learning.

Agents generally feel confident enough to conduct and coordinate community service-learning activities, despite the fact that a large majority would be interested in training. Their confidence in training leaders, however, was lower. Optional training should be made available to 4-H agents. It is also recommended that this training provide easy-to-use materials for the agents to utilize. In particular, the training should address how agents should train and coordinate volunteer leaders to become active in the area of community service-learning. Detailed information and resources should be provided to 4-H agents.

A majority of the extension 4-H agents in this study cover a variety of undergraduate majors, are young adults with little to moderate experience, and have no formal training in community service-learning. Given the large number of new extension agents that have been hired recently, special attention should be given to those who have not received any community service-learning materials from the state 4-H office. In particular, agents should be provided materials to use in recruiting and training volunteers to work with community service-learning activities.

No relationship exists between the agents' perceptions of community-service learning, and age, experience, or community service-learning training. Although no recommendations are warranted based on this conclusion, it is recommended that optional training be made available for extension 4-H agents who wish to expand on their parish community service-learning activities.

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# STATUS OF COMMUNITY SERVICE-LEARNING IN 4-H PROGRAMS

## A Critique

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In this study, the authors do an excellent job in clearly stating the purpose and objectives. They also present a good case for the need of identifying if 4-H extension agents are utilizing a planned, experiential approach to community service-learning.

The researchers also did an excellent job in identifying the target population and selecting individuals for the study (all from the target population were surveyed). Field testing of the survey instrument was conducted, and the reported measures of internal consistency were very high. The data collection and follow-up procedures were obviously well done, as an extremely high response rate (over 95%) was obtained.

The following are questions that arose after reading the conclusions and recommendations section.

- Since the study was restricted to Louisiana, should this be highlighted in the conclusions/ recommendations section? Should it also be included in the title? This would eliminate any misunderstanding on the part of a reader who only looked at the conclusions/recommendations section.

- Although there was a high response rate, the authors indicated that thirty of the respondents did not complete one section of the questionnaire. This means that only 87 out of the target population of 123 (70%) provided all the information necessary for the study. Have you conducted a census when 30% of the people have not responded? Is it appropriate to continue to refer to the study as a census—especially for the purpose of analysis? Should this also be reflected in the conclusions?

- Are all the conclusions supported by data from this study? The authors seem ready to conclude that a drop in the number of participants in community service learning activities was a result of a decrease in 4-H membership at the high school level. They also note that there may be an increase in the percentage of those 4-H members participating in community service-learning activities at the high school level from the elementary level. However, there is no data shown to support this conclusion. Is it possible that the reverse may be true?

Was an important finding ignored? The authors utilize an expert's opinion to determine if the strength of a relationship had any practical significance. Using the expert's method of classification, they found that one relationship was more than negligible—yet it was dismissed in terms of significance. The relationship, although low, seems very important—older agents were less supportive of community service-learning activities than younger agents. I believe this is a finding that deserves further attention and study.

The strong support of the study by extension leaders in the state obviously helped with the rate of return. Did it also influence the positive ratings by the agents? We tend to be supportive of things that are deemed important to the people who do our evaluations.