Volunteer Leader Development - Digest and Modules

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The California 4-H Volunteer Development Workgroup was organized to provide volunteers with foundational resources necessary to be effective leaders with youth. Preliminary assessments and reviews led the workgroup to design an innovative training program centered on the development of a core publication entitled the 4-H Project Leaders' Digest. The publication was subsequently supported by thematic train-the-trainer modules designed for delivery by staff and volunteer management teams. Evaluations and surveys indicate the resources and trainings are current, relevant and practical.

Effective youth development programming requires a solid investment in the development of volunteer leaders and staff members. To maximize the vast volunteer base that is available to 4-H, the Volunteer Development Workgroup, comprising county based academics and staff from the statewide 4-H youth development program, was organized to develop resources which provide volunteers with foundational components based on current research and practices.

In this article we first describe the development of two volunteer development resources, namely, the 4-H Project Leaders' Digest and training modules to support key topics of the Digest. Second, we share the results of its impact for professional development of staff and volunteers.

Training Resources for Volunteer Effectiveness

The workgroup reviewed the literature on volunteer development and identified six elements as being critical for meeting the needs of volunteers today: evaluation, management, motivation, recruitment, recognition and training. This review focuses on the literature examining the process and content of training – on which the development of the Digest and subsequent training modules was based. Training is critical for volunteer effectiveness (Van Winkle, Butler, Bowman, & Manoogian, 2002). Effective training is important to achieving the mission of an organization, whereas poor or inadequate training can harm an organization (Kaslon, Lodl, & Greve, 2005). An effective training program includes a variety of delivery methods, such as short, timely experiential workshops (Ami, Zinger, & Ashkenazy, 2003), practical written materials, and on-line lessons that provide consistent training across a wide geographical area (Kaslon, Lodl, & Greve, 2005).

Research suggests that training is essential to planning and implementing youth development programs (Snider, 1985; Hoover and Conner, 2001; Van Winkle, Busler, Bowman, & Manoogian, 2002; Smith, Meehan, Enfield, & George, 2004). Without effective training, written materials such as the Digest would not fully develop the capacity of volunteers to implement youth development principles. Studies also point to the importance of developmentally appropriate learning, as well as indicate the need to include strategies for authentic application to enable practitioners to improve on what they do (Silliman, 2007). As 4-H project curricula are typically organized around specific age groups, the first step in the training design was to build the understanding of developmental characteristics. Research relates developmental characteristics of youth that are both linear and dynamic (Katz, 1996). Understanding the domains (e.g., physical, cognitive, emotional, social)

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effectively can improve volunteer knowledge and skills (Silliman, 2007). Curricula developed with age appropriate considerations have proven effective in the California 4-H Youth Development Program, with projects such as Youth Experiences in Science (Ponzio, Junge, Manglallan, & Smith, 2000).

The Development of the 4-H Project Leaders' Digest

As a preliminary step, the workgroup collected and reviewed volunteer development resources being used at the time from the county based staff, including orientation. It was assessed that most county training resources were focused on policy, and that volunteer development would be best accomplished first with substantive staff development. The next step was conducting a staff survey regarding the types and effectiveness of "volunteer management teams" and "volunteer development systems" that exist in county-based 4-H YD programs in California. Data from staff statewide suggested that as the field of youth development evolved over the past decade, the materials available for volunteer development in California had not kept pace with current research and practice. In addition, there was not a single, consistent foundational resource being used by counties throughout the state. The Project Leaders' Digest was developed based on the literature around positive youth development content that volunteers need to be effective in their work with young people. The purpose of this new guide was to shift from a focus on policy to one of positive youth development.

The final version of the Digest resulted in a visually attractive twelve-page guide with principles applicable not only to 4-H, but also to other youth development programs and organizations. Themes included: essential elements of 4-H youth development; citizenship, leadership and life skills; experiential learning; learning styles and strategies; youth characteristics; teaching opportunities; youth adult partnerships; and safety. The format for each section includes an introductory paragraph, basic concepts, and an "Apply What You Have Learned" box. The centerfold of two pages is specific to 4-H volunteer leaders regarding common terminology, participation requirements, structures and activities. The guide is available at: http://www.ca4h.org/files/4462.pdf

The Digest was distributed to staff and volunteers at two different conferences attended by each of these audiences. A subsequent step resulting from the success of the publication was the development of training modules to support the Digest topics.

The Development of the Project Leaders' Digest Training Modules

The Digest modules were created as a response to staff feedback for support information needed to complement the Digest. The workgroup began the task of developing modules to accompany four of the eight topics in the Digest. The first topics for which modules were developed were: working with 4-H members (youth characteristics); citizenship, leadership and life skills; project planning; and project meeting. Based on the literature review, a train-the-trainer format was selected, initially for staff to use with volunteer teams. Each module included a Power Point presentation and presenter's guide, with companion educational tools such as activity handouts, matrices, an evaluation tool, and supplemental resource information. Each module training delivery was designed to be delivered in an hour and 15-minute period.

Sub-teams were assigned to focus on the development of each of the four modules, with field testing conducted in each staff member's respective county. Simultaneous to the county field testing, the project meeting module was piloted at two 2007 events: staff development training in San Diego with twenty-five participants representing primarily the southern region of the state, and the State Leaders' Forum in Asilomar with adult volunteers and participating staff. Of the 4-H staff participating in the San Diego conference, 65% strongly agreed that the workshop would be relatively easy for them to present. 80% strongly agreed that many volunteers with whom they worked with would benefit from such a workshop. Volunteers at the Forum expressed that this type of training was needed in every 4-H community club and liked how positive youth development concepts could be introduced in a

meeting format. The task that followed was revising and editing.

For introduction and additional input, the workgroup team made a featured presentation in 2007 at the Statewide Staff Development Day held at UC Davis. The workgroup members facilitated breakout sessions on each of the four topics for discussion with 4-H staff, with comments incorporated into the development of the modules.

Rollout of the Digest Modules

After the final versions of the modules were completed, the first formal roll out of the train-the-trainer training for staff took place in fall 2008. Four identical deliveries were conducted throughout different parts of the state, starting with the north, continuing with the north central and central valley, and ending with the south. Presented by workgroup members, each training was held over two consecutive half days, with two modules presented each half day. As the workgroup members had intended for the training, participants were actively engaged. Participating staff had the opportunity to debrief and discuss how to incorporate the educational tools into their county programs.

I. METHOD: 4-H PROJECT LEADERS' DIGEST EVALUATION

Data

In 2009 an evaluation tool was created by the workgroup to evaluate the use of the 4-H Project Leaders' Digest at the county level. The staff evaluation tool was revised for volunteers and made available at a state teen leadership conference, as well as posted on-line, with hard copies also available at the county level. The volunteer survey was comprised of eight questions regarding usefulness and applicability of the Digest to their work. There were two multiple choice questions, one regarding how the publication had been acquired and the other about choices for future trainings as a follow-up to the Digest. The survey included six open-ended questions, including questions on how the volunteer might use the publication with their work with other volunteers and suggested topics that might be useful for future editions of the Digest. An additional question gave volunteers an opportunity to make general comments.

Sample

The workgroup gathered data from staff and 4-H volunteers on the effectiveness of the Digest. There were 43 staff responses (representing 57% of staff in the state). 65 volunteer respondents represented 40% of the counties, both urban and rural, and primarily from the north central and central valley regions of the state. Approximately 70% of these leaders responded on-site at the teen leadership conference at UC Davis, with the remaining 30% responding online.

Analysis

Data were analyzed through descriptive statistics and by coding the qualitative information into main themes.

I. FINDINGS: 4-H PROJECT LEADERS' DIGEST

Staff Impact

Staff generally were very satisfied and gratified with having a single consistent statewide publication for volunteer development. The area of greatest staff impact was for new leader orientation, with ninety-five percent of the staff respondents indicating that they used the Digest for this type of training. Overall impressions were that the document was needed and well-timed, providing policies, current youth development principles and trends, and examples of theory put into practice.

Volunteer Impact

Volunteers who responded to the survey were generally pleased with the publication, particularly for new leaders. Many respondents also indicated that having many elements in a single publication was very helpful. Some quotes from leaders:

> *"Great document - I would think every adult involved should have a copy."*

"It made most of the policies and guidelines available in one document."

"It helps leaders in the course of leading."

"It's a great introduction for new leaders/clubs. I think more training would be helpful."

Volunteers suggested a variety of trainings for the modules, both on-site and online.

The overall response by both staff and leaders was that the Digest was relevant, applicable, and professional in appearance, and they were interested in gaining online access to the document as well as customizing it to suit their needs. This validated a statewide need to make information available in ways beyond hard copy distribution in the county. As a result, the Digest was made available routinely at statewide and regional events, and eventually online as a free downloadable publication.

The survey data provided evidence of positive acceptance of the Digest by both staff and volunteers as a statewide publication for all counties. In addition, there was general support for training that validated the workgroup's intention of proceeding with the development of training modules to support the publication's themes.

II. METHOD: 4-H Digest Training Modules

Approximately 50% of the staff statewide participated in the rollout training for staff development. In 2010, 57% of the staff participated in a follow-up survey regarding their use of the Digest modules in their counties, regardless if they had participated in the 2008 trainings.

Data

At the 2008 statewide trainings, a standard evaluation form was given to staff participants at the completion of each module delivery. In addition to asking for the number of years of service, the evaluation included seven questions. Five questions included a Likert scale of four rankings from strongly agree to strongly disagree, requesting ranking the modules for format, ease in presentation, and plans for use in the next year. There were two open-ended questions regarding barriers and delivery.

Sample

During the spring of 2010 a follow-up statewide survey on the use of the Digest modules was conducted, resulting in responses from 41 staff (54%). This survey gathered staff data on the county use of the modules and their effectiveness.

Analysis

Survey responses were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques. Qualitative responses regarding barriers and delivery were coded into main themes.

II. FINDINGS: 4-H Digest Training Modules

Staff impact

Table 1 shows evaluation results from staff participants from the 2008 trainings at four sites. The score is based on a Likert scale (1 - strongly disagree and 4 - strongly agree). These scores reflect that a majority of staff either agreed or strongly agreed that

TABLE 1
Showing mean participants ratings on modules training

	Citizenship, Leadership, and Life Skills Module	*Project Meeting Module*	*Project Planning Module*	*Working with 4-H Members Module*
Training easy to follow	3.5	3.3	3.5	3.6
Easy for me to present	3.2	3.3	3.3	3.3
Easily make changes	3.4	3.4	3.4	3.2
Plan to conduct in next year	3.4	3.4	3.3	3.1

the training was easy to follow, that the modules were flexible enough to customize or make changes, and that they were planning to train volunteers using these modules within the next year. The highest score for the ease in following the training indicates strong satisfaction for the delivery of the training. The lowest score is for ease in presentation. General comments noted that there was repetition of key elements and types of activities amongst several of the modules. Each module was designed to function as a stand-alone piece, and was delivered as such in consecutive fashion. Results from staff in the 2010 survey on their use of the modules is shown in Table 2.

Noteworthy in the results from this survey is that many staff adapted the modules. As one staff person said, *"The modules have been very helpful and have made it easier to plan and adjust my own trainings and orientations."* This adjustment demonstrates the flexibility of the modules, but at the same time, poses the question of whether the modules might benefit from updating or modification, particularly for different audiences. In addition to training community club volunteers, several staff have modified the core modules for volunteers with special interest groups as well as for teen leaders working with younger members.

With a two year period for implementing the delivery of the modules in counties, the 2010 survey data indicated that the modules are being used, with the project planning and meeting modules used more often. The comments regarding repetition amongst the modules gives the workgroup cause to consider deliveries that are consolidated or abbreviated. Further data collection on the adapted use of the modules might be helpful in determining the future direction of the modules. With the passing of two years of staff only access for the modules, the workgroup determined in summer of 2010 to make the modules available to volunteers and the public through the State 4-H website.

DISCUSSION

Results of this project support previous research on staff and volunteer development. Much of our experience supports the research that adequate and effective training is important. The Volunteer

TABLE 2
Showing staff responses on surveys regarding Volunteer Development Modules

Check the Volunteer Development Modules you have used. (Response rate = 49%)

65%	Project Planning
55%	Project Meeting
45%	Working with 4-H Members
50%	Citizenship, Leadership and Other Life Skills

Do you find the training modules most useful if you: (check all that apply) (Response rate = 54%)

23%	Use the Presenter Notes and supporting materials as designed
36%	Modify the digital presentation and Presenter Notes.
41%	Modify the supporting materials.

Please rate the materials and presentation format of the training modules. (Response rate = 39%)

13%	Poor
0%	Fair
56%	Good
31%	Excellent

Please rate the impact the training modules have had in your county.

6%	Poor
25%	Fair
50%	Good
19%	Excellent

Development Workgroup aims to provide consistent, ongoing training to 4-H volunteers that is based on the latest research in youth development. The 4-H Project Leaders' Digest has provided staff, volunteers and youth professionals with a peer-reviewed, research-based publication supported by modules that are current and consistent statewide. Staff and volunteer responses have indicated the resources were needed, timely, and well-developed. The Digest has been sought by Extension in other states as a resource. In June 2009, the workgroup received the NAE4HA Western Region Team Award for Excellence in Club Support.

The acceptance and use of the modules appears mixed, though it is generally well-received by those who use it. Unlike the Digest, the modules were not introduced at a statewide conference that reached both staff and leaders. Also unlike the Digest, hard copies of the modules were not sent directly to each county office, but instead, given only to staff who attended on-site trainings. In addition, the modules, unlike the Digest, require training to be used. Research indicates that there is a growing acceptance by volunteers and a willingness to explore alternative deliveries for training beyond traditional methods (Kaslon, 2005). Unfortunately, the format for the modules training has been essentially a single method of delivery, face-to-face, with the training series lengthy when used in its entirety. Though the overall response from staff and volunteers on the modules is generally positive, the information only reflects those who have participated in the training, which is approximately half of the statewide 4-H staff. As a result, the modules are not reaching their full audience potential. One possible factor for this lack of use of the modules may be its design as a train-the-trainer resource for county teams, rather than for direct delivery. As noted in the most current staff survey of the modules, more staff modify the modules and its supporting materials than use it as is. This indicates that the modules might be modified or enhanced for more effective staff use. Another consideration for when there are reduced staff resources and increased responsibilities is that developing and maintaining volunteer development training teams may not be a reasonable or realistic goal for county staff. Alternative deliveries for implementing the modules might increase their use in counties.

The transition of the State 4-H Youth Development Program from face-to-face trainings to more virtual communications will include the increased use of technology to reach both staff and volunteers. Immediately after the statewide modules training rollout, workgroup members experimented with the use of online technology as a delivery alternative with the "working with 4-H" module. This module was selected due to its strong information base that lends itself more to online delivery. Though the participants responded very favorably to this delivery as an alternative, the challenges with carrying out interactive activities online is affected by limited access to participants and the high technical skill level needed by the participants as well as the facilitators. Though limited in its delivery, online delivery is promising as a feasible, cost-efficient option, particularly as staff increase their technology proficiency.

CONCLUSION

The Project Leaders' Digest has been made available to the public as a free downloadable publication via the State 4-H website. In July 2010, the modules were released on the website for public access, with the intention that county staff work with volunteer teams to implement the modules training. The site is located at: http://www.ca4h.org/Resources/Volunteers/Project_Leader_Resources/

Further information is needed to assess the impact of the Digest and modules on staff effectiveness with volunteer development training. In addition, with the release of the modules online for public access, information regarding expanded use of the modules by the volunteers and the public needs to be collected.

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