

Impacts from the Choosing to Lead Program: An Evaluation of the 4-H Current and Emerging Leadership Initiative



OVERVIEW OF INITIATIVE

In 2005, the 4-H Current and Emerging Leadership initiative was formally launched to aid in the development of leadership skills for 4-H professionals across the country. This effort is led by National 4-H Headquarters, CSREES, USDA in collaboration with the National 4-H Leadership Trust, National 4-H Council, the State 4-H Program Leaders and National Association of Extension 4-H Agents.

The success of 4-H in the 21st century is dependent upon the leadership guiding the system. Towards this end, the 4-H Current and Emerging Leadership initiative is designed to help facilitate and strengthen the development of critical skills necessary for achieving the 4-H vision, through a variety of professional development experiences. These experiences are targeted towards current State 4-H Program Leaders, new hires at the national level, and other 4-H professionals with an interest in understanding the scope of leadership in 4-H.

The intended outcomes of the initiative are for participants to:

- Learn and apply operational and strategic leadership concepts to 4-H youth development
- Be prepared to take on greater responsibility and exhibit strong leadership for years to come
- Build relationships for the future that reflect cohesion, trust, and continuity
- Positively impact the long-term success of the 4-H movement (Stone, 2005)

INITIATIVE IMPLEMENTATION & ACTIVITIES

In 2005, the Choosing to Lead program was offered as part of the Current and Emerging Leadership Initiative. The Choosing to Lead program is a one day event held prior to the annual NAE4-HA conference and is geared towards personal leadership development. The purpose of Choosing to Lead is “to give the big picture of 4-H, assess leadership and management styles, and build a network of colleagues for the future of 4-H” (National 4-H Headquarters, Professional Development, ¶2). Mentors and coaches aid a reflection process based off the results of an assessment of each participant’s personal leadership style. This activity is designed to help participants recognize their strengths and focus on developing key competencies. Stated objectives are to develop:

- A better understanding of the big picture of 4-H and opportunities for professional growth
- Insights into their leadership style and plans for development
- A network of professional colleagues across the United States

METHODOLOGY

This evaluation was conducted using mixed methods, based upon Kirkpatrick’s Levels of Evaluation (Winfrey, 1999). Choosing to Lead was assessed at Levels 1 and 2 (Table 1).

Table 1 *Kirkpatrick’s Levels of Evaluation* (Winfrey, 1999)

Level	Description	Appropriate Evaluation Method
1	Reactions	Quantitative
2	Knowledge, Skills, & Attitudes	Quantitative
3	Transfer	Qualitative
4	Results	Qualitative



An online questionnaire was designed and deployed with Select Survey software. The questionnaire was divided into two sections, with three questions assessing participants’ reactions to the 2005 Choosing to Lead program and twelve questions assessing the knowledge, skills or attitudes impacted by program attendance. The Level 2 questions were developed as post-then (before/after) statements, appropriate for evaluating the impact of a program (Rockwell & Kohn, 1989). The program objectives were used to develop the questions, which were reviewed for content validity by a panel of three experts. Minor revisions were made prior to inviting the participants to complete the questionnaire.

A total of nineteen possible participants were invited to participate in the program evaluation via an e-mail with a direct link to the survey. Of the original nineteen, there were seventeen valid e-mail addresses. One possible participant responded to say that she had not been able to attend the Choosing to Lead program, and was removed from the study population. Three reminder notices were sent to non-respondents on three day intervals to increase the response rate (Dillman, 2000).

Fourteen participants completed the questionnaire, for a response rate of 93%. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics in SPSS 12.0 for Windows.

FINDINGS

Level 1: Reactions

Participants were asked to rate their agreement with three questions about their involvement in the Choosing to Lead program, using a Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neither Agree/Disagree, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree). Participants tended to rate the program favorably (Figure 1). Eighty-six percent of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I enjoyed participating in the Choosing to Lead program.” When asked to rate their agreement with the statement, “I feel that participating in Choosing to Lead was worth my time,” 86% either agreed or strongly agreed. Finally, for the statement, “I feel that participating in Choosing to Lead was a positive experience,” 93% of participants either agreed or strongly agreed.

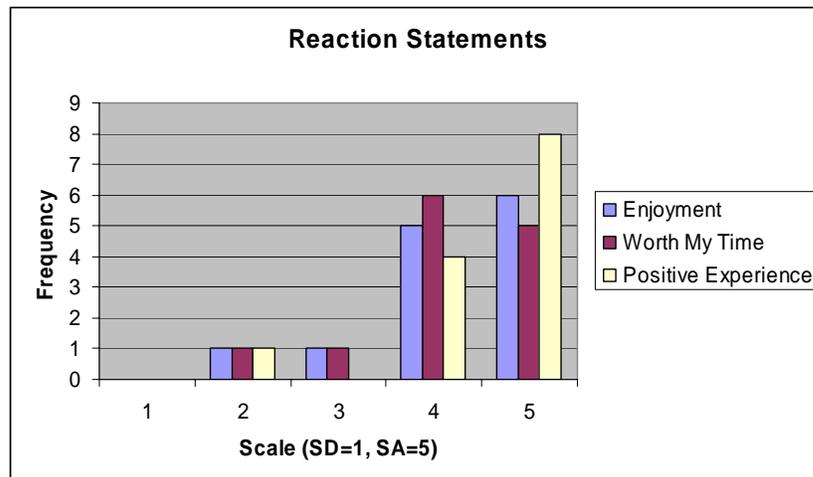


Figure 1. Responses to Choosing to Lead reaction statements (n=14).

Level 2: Knowledge, Attitudes and Skills

To assess the knowledge, attitudes and skills gained as a result of the Choosing to Lead program, participants were asked to indicate their agreement to a set of twelve statements. Two responses to each statement were necessary: a “before attending” level of agreement and an “after attending”

level of agreement. In general, participants perceived they increased their knowledge, improved their attitudes, or gained new skills as result of the Choosing to Lead program (Table 2).

Table 2

Responses to Choosing to Lead Statements: Knowledge, Attitude, & Skills Before and After Attending



Statements	% of "Agree" and "Strongly Agree"	
	Before	After
I understand the "big picture" of 4-H.	78	93
I can explain the national goals of 4-H to another person.	36	78
I am familiar with opportunities for professional growth.	50	86
I understand my personal leadership style.	50	93
I understand how my leadership style relates to the way I work with co-workers and volunteers.	50	100
I know how I can develop my personal leadership skills.	64	86
Having a coach/mentor is helpful for reflecting upon my role as a professional.	69	93
Having a coach/mentor is important for improving as a professional.	71	100
Listening to a coach/mentor is a valuable tool for learning about my role as a professional.	78	100
I often network with colleagues across the United States.	50	72
It is normal for me to hear from colleagues in other states.	21	50
I have a strong professional network of colleagues.	28	71

^a Shading divides statements corresponding to separate program objectives.

IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, participants in Choosing to Lead perceived themselves to have positive reactions to the program, with only one participant dissenting. It is possible that this individual had different expectations for the program. Future efforts should consider:

- Continuing to clearly outline the program objectives in promotional and registration materials,
- Including more specific descriptions of program activities in the Choosing to Lead overview located on the National 4-H Headquarters: Professional Development web page to aid in clarifying participant expectations, and,
- Inviting learners to become engaged in the program planning process.

Adult learning theory addresses the learner's "need to know *how* learning will be conducted, *what* learning will occur, and *why* learning is important" (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005, p. 184). Providing opportunities for participants to take ownership in their learning addresses this need and should be a consideration for all three professional development programs.

Based upon the percentage increases in participants' agreement with the Level 2 statements, Choosing to Lead was successful in improving knowledge, skills and attitudes. The most substantial improvement was found in the statements addressing the development of personal

leadership skills. There was the least amount of overall perceived improvement in the area of coaching and mentoring. Rather than being interpreted as a negative reflection on the program, it should be noted that a high degree of agreement existed prior to Choosing to Lead, which limits how much improvement can be made. Additionally, focusing on mentoring and coaching was not a primary highlight of the program.



Perhaps more of a concern arises when discussing the program objective of providing participants with a network of professional colleagues across the United States. Although participants perceived their professional network was strengthened as a result of their attendance at Choosing to Lead, the findings show that this objective had the lowest percentages of “agree” and “strongly” agree responses. This indicates a need for continued attention to network developing activities.

Specific recommendations include:

- Continuing with the same personal leadership development activities in the future.
- Continuing discussions to enhance participants’ understanding and ability to articulate national 4-H goals and priorities.
- Incorporating a more prominent mentoring/coaching aspect in the program, as participants clearly indicated they perceived the involvement of mentors and coaches to be valuable.
- Providing more time for networking during the program, as well as adding more follow-up opportunities for participants to develop new relationships, possibly through the use of a listserv, e-newsletter, or informal get-togethers at subsequent conferences.

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