



D. Wilfong

What about 4-H?

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Modoc County's 4-H re-enrollment began declining in the early 1980s from a 20-year average of 70 percent to 59 percent in 1983. Since the percentage of return membership reflects the degree to which the 4-H program is meeting clientele needs, re-enrollment is the major indicator of the program's quality. To learn why youth remain in, or leave, 4-H in Modoc County, I conducted a study over a three-year period, 1984-86.

Previous studies have addressed why youth join and drop out of 4-H. Other researchers have found that project work was a major factor influencing a member's decision to re-enroll, that 4-H attracted youth who were motivated to learn and whose parents were active in community organizations, and that members dropped out of 4-H if their brother, sister, or friends had dropped out.

Beyond this information, questions remain. Why did friends, brothers, and sisters drop out of 4-H? Do members of Modoc's 4-H program join and drop out for the same reasons as found in other studies? What influence does participation in other activities and organizations have on 4-H membership?

Survey

A questionnaire was designed to seek significant reasons why young people join and leave the 4-H program. The 24

questions asked about the member's participation in sports and other organizations, 4-H involvement of the family, the member's activity in and opinion of 4-H, and thoughts on why members join and drop out of 4-H.

The survey identified two groups: members who were currently active in 4-H and those who had not re-enrolled in the current year. Both groups completed the same questionnaire. Evaluations were

As 4-H members mature, they need more challenging projects to hold their interest

made from the two groups as a whole, and comparisons were made between the two groups.

During each of the three years, one-third of the county's 4-H clubs provided data. Active members completed the survey at a club meeting.

The dropout group for each club was identified by the club leader, who also indicated whether each former member had graduated from high school, had moved away, or was still living in the county. Only the dropouts living in the community or county were considered for the

survey. Each former member was contacted by mail and asked to complete and return the questionnaire. If the member had not responded after three requests, the leader or a teen leader made a final, personal request, if appropriate.

Young people join 4-H to learn. To attract and keep members, 4-H must offer projects that are competitive with other activities, according to this study.

Results

Only 220 of the 406 members who had dropped out were available for surveying, largely because 148 of the former members had moved from the county. Surveys were returned from 126, or 57 percent of the available dropouts and from 305 active members (table 1).

The active and dropout groups were very similar in most respects. They consisted of about 36 percent boys and 64 percent girls. Respondents had joined 4-H at around 10 years of age and had been in 4-

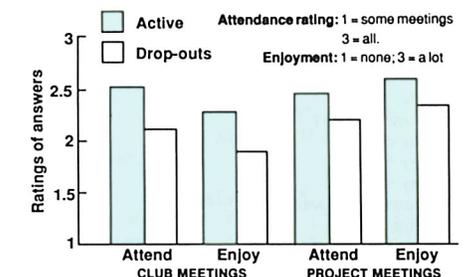


Fig. 1. Dropouts attended fewer meetings and enjoyed them less than active members did. Both preferred project meetings.

H about three years when surveyed; 95 percent had brothers and/or sisters. About 61 percent of the dropouts and 73 percent of the active group had brothers or sisters in 4-H. The difference of 12 percent was not significant.

There was a difference in the average age of 13.3 years for the dropouts and 12.3 years for the active group. A significant difference was that members living on farms were more likely to remain active in 4-H than nonfarm youth. When surveyed, 32 percent of the dropout group and 24 percent of the active members had completed one year of 4-H.

The active and dropout groups differed little in the number of sports they participated in or the number of organizations with which they were involved.

About 90 percent of the dropout group and 81 percent of the active members stated that most of the kids in their schools had a general knowledge of 4-H.

Members were asked to rate their attendance at club and project meetings and their enjoyment of each. The dropout group had attended fewer meetings and enjoyed them less than those in the active group. Both groups, however, enjoyed project meetings more than club meetings (fig. 1). The dropout groups also had participated in fewer 4-H activities and events before dropping out.

A much greater percentage of the active group stated their parents were "very" or "sometimes" active in 4-H than "not" active (table 2). The reverse was true of the dropout group; more rated their parents as "not" active than "very" or "sometimes" active.

When asked to give the two most important reasons for joining 4-H, both groups' first choice was to learn new things. They differed on the second choice, the active members listing participation in activities and the dropout group giving equal votes to joining for a particular project and because of friends already in 4-H (table 3).

Answers given to the eight listed reasons for joining 4-H by both groups were analyzed to find out if they would predict that a member would drop out or remain active. The significant differences between the two groups indicate that youth with the strongest tendency to stay in 4-H had joined to comply with their parents' wishes and to compete for awards. Youth who tended to drop out of 4-H had joined because of friends already in 4-H and for a particular project.

When asked to rate the relative importance of 11 possible reasons for leaving 4-H, the primary reason for both groups was lack of time. The second reason for dropping 4-H, according to the active members, was that there are other organi-

zations to join, while the dropout group's second choice was that projects wanted were not available. The third reason for both groups was not liking the club leaders (table 4).

Discussion

The most significant finding of this study is that a member's participation in 4-H is associated with the involvement of at least one of his or her parents. An active parent, in the eyes of the child, ensures an active 4-H member. The 4-H program must therefore satisfy the combined needs of parents and youth and provide responsible roles for each.

The youth of Modoc County join 4-H today for the same reasons found by researchers for over 30 years—to learn through project activities. This, coupled with the member's enjoyment of project meetings, should reinforce the value of

project work over the other activities 4-H offers. Leaders, advisors, and administration of 4-H should be inspired to devote more energy to strengthening the educational values of the project programs if longer membership is desired.

Respondents to the survey identified lack of time and the availability of other organizations to join as major reasons for leaving 4-H. At least two-thirds of the youth surveyed participated in one or more sports and one or more organizations other than 4-H. Those who become members are busy and apparently prioritize their time for 4-H in competition with other activities. To attract youth to join and continue, 4-H must offer a project program that is competitive with other youth organizations.

The mobility of society is important in 4-H dropout, since 36 percent of the former members had left the local program because they moved from the county. A favorable experience, however, might encourage these youth to join 4-H elsewhere.

Conclusion

This study indicated that 4-H in Modoc County has competition for youth's time and interest. Those who participated in this study stated they joined to learn. If 4-H is to satisfy this need and also to compete with other activities for youth's interest, project programs must be upgraded to challenge members as they mature.

Specific, unavailable projects were major influences on the dropout group. To avoid member disappointment and possible resentment, 4-H clubs should offer only those projects for which there are leaders.

County 4-H advisors and club leaders need to enhance selection and orientation of project leaders to achieve more challenging programs. To accomplish this, it is critical that state administration provide simple lesson plans and readily available resources for project leaders.

Adults' role in the program should be reassessed. Increased involvement of parents might reduce the dropout rate. On the other hand, members' dislike of leaders ranked high as a reason for dropping out. Adults must therefore assess how they relate to the 4-H program and youth, so that they provide support and encouragement without dictating and controlling.

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TABLE 1. Modoc 4-H survey 1984-86

Item	Numbers (and %)
Dropouts:	406 (32%)
Graduated from high school	38 (9%)
Moved from county	148 (36%)
Still in county	220 (54%)
Surveyed, of those still in county	126 (57%)
Active members:	857 (68%)
Surveyed of potential	305 (36%)

TABLE 2. Participation of parents in 4-H

Answer	Active members	
	Dropouts	%
Yes, very active	14	48
Participate sometimes	25	22
No, not very active	61	30

TABLE 3. Two reasons members joined 4-H

Answer	Active members	
	Dropouts	%
Learn to do new things	59	153
Participate in 4-H activities	31	112
Wanted a particular project*	43	80
Friends already in 4-H*	42	50
Parents wanted me to join*	17	69
Chance to win awards*	11	53
Make new friends	10	27
Other reasons	10	13

* Significant difference between groups

TABLE 4. Reasons why members leave 4-H

Reasons	Active members	
	Dropouts	%
Don't have enough time	1.37	1.29
Other organizations to join	.98	1.06
Projects aren't available*	1.05	.85
Don't like the leaders	1.00	.94
Friends are not in 4-H	.98	.92
Too much record keeping	.77	.79
Too expensive	.77	.71
Parents want them to leave*	.56	.75
Didn't win awards*	.49	.74
Don't like the uniforms	.62	.60
Don't like award competition*	.35	.52

* Significant difference between groups