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## 4-H Portfolios: A Practical Model for Assessing Youth Impact in Utah Communities

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## **4-H Portfolios: A Practical Model for Assessing Youth Impact in Utah Communities**

Kelsey Romney

### **Abstract**

*A statewide youth needs assessment ranked writing cover letters and résumés as top life skills needed by Utah's youth. The Utah 4-H Portfolio program has taught over 1,600 youth in grades 3 to 12 to write cover letters and résumés since 2019. Working with adult leaders in their communities, youth are using 4-H Portfolios to solidify a clear pathway from their 4-H experience to a successful career.*

### **Introduction**

Each 4-H Portfolio consists of a cover letter and résumé written by youth in grades 3 – 12 to record developmental milestones and set goals for the future. 4-H Portfolios are beneficial for youth and their communities; youth learn career readiness and life skills as they compile personalized documents, and adult community leaders get a glimpse into the future through the ambition and goals of young people. Guided by a nationally recognized curriculum (Lerner & Lerner, 2013), the 4-H Portfolios program aims to help youth achieve developmental milestones as they become contributing, successful adults in their communities.

Utah 4-H of Utah State University (USU) Extension facilitated the 4-H Portfolios program for the past 20 years. However, the original 4-H Portfolio required each 4-H member to submit an approximately 300-page physical binder for review by volunteer judges. Compiling and transporting physical binders were obstacles for rural and/or underprivileged youth. The original format also discouraged participation from new members with less experience since it was difficult for them to compete with more experienced youth members.

In 2018, a program evaluation showed the original 4-H Portfolio was an ineffective, inaccessible, and a difficult process for youth and volunteers. Statewide, only 24% of 4-H members were submitting a 4-H Portfolio in 2018, and all counties reported that these were submitted in modified formats to simplify the process. Additionally, there was a need for career readiness resources from Utah 4-H to support the development of portfolios. Meanwhile, a recent statewide youth needs assessment showed that learning to write cover letters and résumés was one of the top 10 life skills needed by Utah's youth.

### **Response and Target Audience**

In 2019, a team of 4-H professionals at USU Extension sought to transition the 4-H Portfolio requirements and simplify the process to a standardized cover letter and résumé format. The revised 4-H Portfolio format spurred development of many new 4-H resources, including a 4-H Portfolio training template, guidebook, webpage, cover letter and résumé examples, and judging rubrics. Resources were provided statewide to 4-H members, volunteers, and professionals. During 4-H contests throughout the state, youth were asked to tailor their cover letters and résumés to different job applications and submit them electronically for review. Due to the ease

and practicality of the new process, there was a dramatic increase in youth participation in the 4-H Portfolios program from 2018 to 2020 as shown in Figure 1.

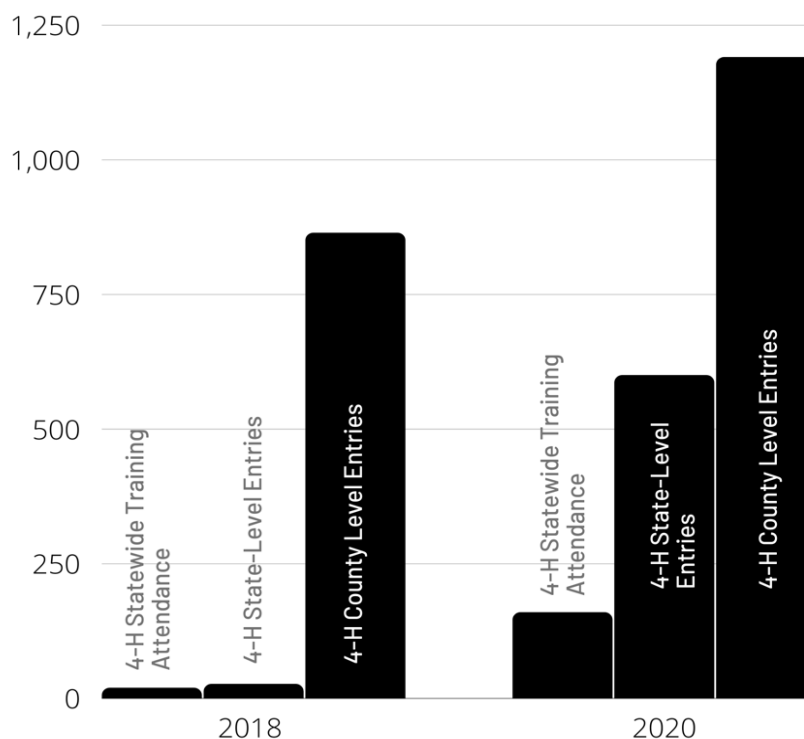


Figure 1. Utah 4-H Portfolio Program Participation

Through 4-H Portfolios, 4-H members of all ages learn to write cover letters and résumés. In 2020, 44% of youth participating in the 4-H State Portfolio Contest were 9 – 12<sup>th</sup> graders, 33% were 6 – 8<sup>th</sup> graders, and 23% were 3 – 5<sup>th</sup> graders. Demographic data were collected to assess program parity for USU Extension civil rights compliance. Figure 2 shows an increase in participation of racially under-represented groups in the 4-H Portfolios program since 2018. Although the 4-H Portfolios program has not achieved parity across all racial groups, significant progress towards parity was made from 2018 to 2020. This suggests the new format has removed previous obstacles to youth participation in the 4-H Portfolios program.

|                                     | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 |
|-------------------------------------|------|------|------|
| American Indian/Alaska Native       |      |      | ✓    |
| Asian                               |      | ✓    | ✓    |
| Black or African American           |      |      | ✓    |
| Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander |      |      |      |
| White                               | ✓    | ✓    | ✓    |
| More than One Race                  |      |      |      |

✓ = Achieves program parity target as compared to Utah's statewide population.

Figure 2. Utah 4-H Portfolio Program Parity Efforts

## Outcomes and Impact

Preliminary evaluation results indicated the new format led to increased accessibility, streamlined coordination, and real-world job application experience for youth. In 2019, there was a transition from the original format as counties adopted the new simplified cover letter and résumé format. Results of the 2020 4-H Portfolios program evaluation showed 1,190 submissions at the county level (i.e., a 38% increase from 2018). After the revised 4-H Portfolio became a standard application tool for state contests and leadership roles, there were over 600 submissions to state-level events; a whopping 2,122% increase since 2018 (Figure 1). Internally, 4-H professionals rated the new 4-H Portfolio as useful on a 5-point scale ( $M = 4.10$ ), and 94% of counties with an active 4-H Portfolios program are now using the new standardized format.

Evaluation results show that youth benefited from the revised 4-H Portfolio. Attendance to the annual statewide 4-H Portfolio training increased from 20 attendees in 2018 to 160 attendees in 2020. In addition, 89% of 4-H Portfolio participants reported learning to write a cover letter and résumé during their 2020 4-H experience, and 87% of youth indicated they will use their 4-H experience to make decisions about their future. Youth also reported they intend to use the skills learned through creating 4-H portfolios for job applications (98%), scholarship applications (96%), leadership roles (81%), and college applications (93%).

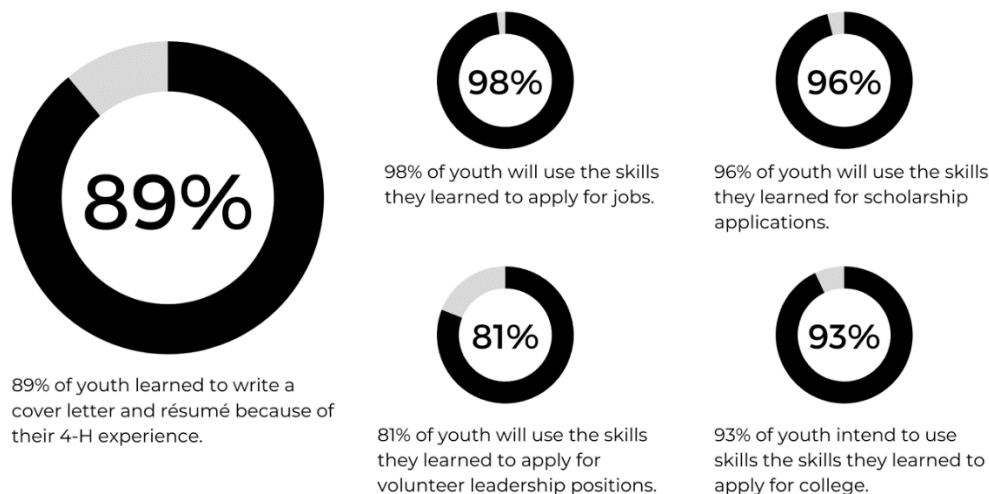


Figure 3. Youth Evaluation Responses to the 2020 Utah 4-H Portfolio Program

## Public Value

The Utah 4-H Portfolios program serves as a self-evaluation tool for youth to measure their progress towards positive youth development. Youth participating in 4-H Portfolio develop skills that can positively impact their future (National 4-H, 2020). Through 4-H Portfolios, youth gain career readiness skills, group belonging, goal achievement, and community involvement (Arnold & Gagnon, 2020). The 4-H Portfolio program gives youth the opportunity to write cover letters,

explain their efforts throughout the 4-H year, and list their goals for the future. Excerpts in Figure 4 provide a snapshot of youth experiences with 4-H.

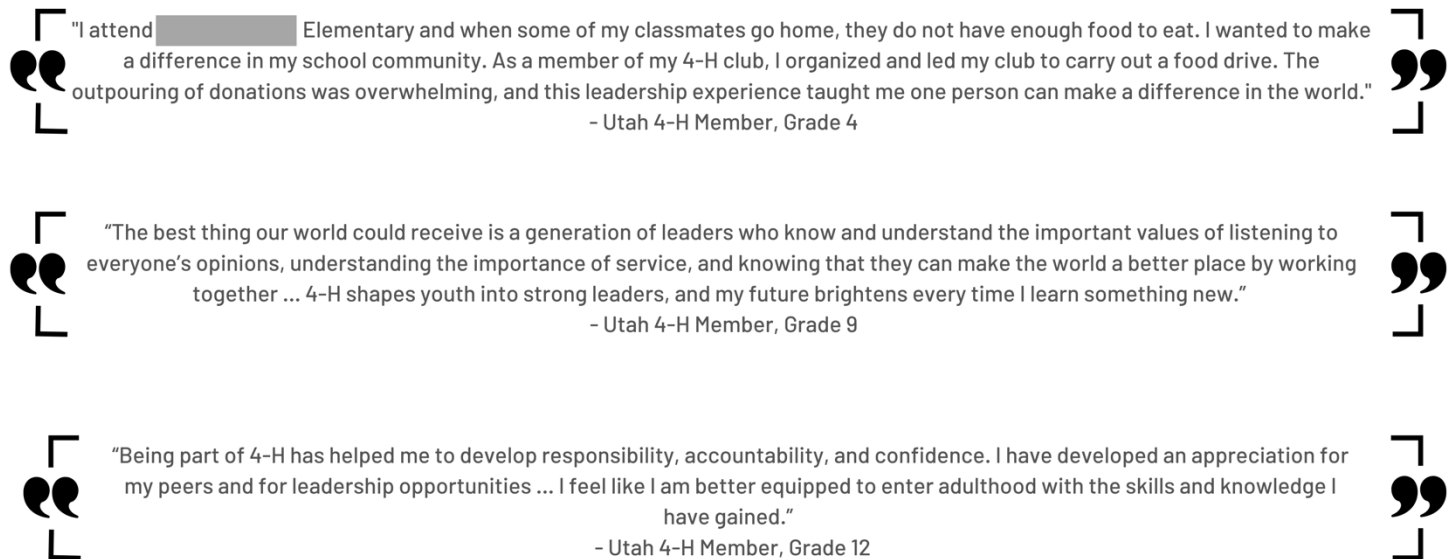


Figure 4. Youth Statements from 2021 Utah 4-H Portfolios

Research demonstrates a need for career readiness skills among Utah youth. Utah 4-H members are learning the skills necessary for finding employment, applying for postsecondary education, and setting personalized goals by creating their 4-H Portfolio. The 4-H Portfolios program is uniquely positioned to provide young people with a voice in their communities. Counties should support the 4-H Portfolio program; it serves as an essential component of youth development education. As a keystone activity in the youth career pathway, 4-H Portfolios facilitate a pipeline of youth excited to make a difference and contribute to society.

## References

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