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Preparing Rural Youth for the Future of Work through Remote Work Education

Andrea T. Schmutz
Utah State University, andrea.schmutz@usu.edu

Alison Campbell
Utah State University

Abbey Bean
Utah State University, abbey.bean@usu.edu

Amanda D. Ali
Utah State University, amanda.ali@usu.edu

Paul Hill
Utah State University, paul.hill@usu.edu

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Preparing Rural Youth for the Future of Work through Remote Work Education

Authors

Andrea T. Schmutz, Alison Campbell, Abbey Bean, Amanda D. Ali, Paul Hill, and Emy Swadley

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Abstract

With population migration out of Utah's rural communities threatening the future workforce in small towns, Utah State University Extension recognized an opportunity to provide remote work education to rural youth to empower them to remain in their communities and seek remote employment. Teaming up with Utah's Rural Online Initiative program, Utah State University Extension created the virtual 4-H Remote Skills Camp: For College and Career Readiness.

Introduction

As more people move to urban centers in search of job opportunities, rural communities struggle to retain their workforce (Lund et al., 2019; Rogers, 2020). In the first decade of the 21st century, Winkler et al. (2013) estimated the average age-specific net migration per 100 individuals for 17 of Utah's rural counties to be -5.8% for ages 15-19 and -38.6% for ages 20-24. There is an opportunity for rural communities to retain future workforce talent by encouraging youth involvement in remote work education through Utah State University (USU) Extension's Rural Online Initiative (ROI), an economic development program (Hill et al., 2020; Reese, 2018). If youth pursue remote work as a career choice, they have the option to remain or return to their communities and still benefit from well-paying jobs. To address youth migration concerns, Utah 4-H teamed up with the ROI program to create the virtual *4-H Remote Skills Camp: For College and Career Readiness*.

Response

The purpose of the *4-H Remote Skills Camp: For College and Career Readiness* is to equip youth with specialized skills and tools to help them thrive in tomorrow's economy, while also introducing them to best practices of remote work. In an attempt to provide relevant educational programs in Utah, USU Extension conducted a statewide needs assessment (Narine, 2019). This assessment underlined the ongoing deficiency of job opportunities in Utah's rural areas, which has been associated with an increased trend of rural-urban migration and high unemployment rates (Harris & Perlich, 2019; Kumar, 2018; Parker et al., 2018). Narine (2019) identified the top three priority needs for rural Utah counties as: (1) well-paying jobs, (2) quality public schools, and (3) steady jobs. Combining learning modules, interactive workshops, and guest lectures from remote working professionals, the *4-H Remote Skills Camp* was designed to address the needs of well-paying and steady jobs in rural Utah by helping rural youth acquire knowledge and skills in four areas: (a) using remote work tools (i.e., video conferencing platforms, team messaging apps); (b) developing a resume and portfolio; (c) gaining an understanding of effective teamwork and collaboration; and (d) building their problem solving and critical thinking skills.

Target Audience

The 4-H Remote Skills Camp was designed for rural high-school youth aged 15-18 years old with the intent of exposing them to the concept of remote work and increasing their knowledge and skills as future remote workers. The course is a blended, one-month program that combines online work with interactive core content, activities, and quizzes. Participants work at their own pace to complete nine modules and are required to attend eight online workshops with their program coordinators. To earn a certificate, participants must complete all assignments and quizzes, earn a minimum score of 80%, and attend all workshops.

The course was facilitated over two separate month-long cohorts with 44 total participants ($N = 44$) from 14 states. A short survey implemented at the start of the course had a response rate of 77% ($n = 34$). Most participants were female (59%) with 25% reporting minority backgrounds. In addition, most participants reported being from a rural county. Like any traditional 4-H camp, the course followed Kolb's (2014) experiential learning model by mimicking the experience of working on a remote team. Camp participants (i.e., colleagues) were spread across the country as the participants learned about remote work through both synchronous workshops and asynchronous learning modules. Participants completed weekly learning modules independently and then attended virtual workshops where together they discussed remote work concepts and participated in hands-on activities to reinforce independent learning. At the end of each workshop, the facilitators guided participants through a reflection exercise to help youth participants recognize how they might apply the newly learned skills in their lives.

Outcomes and Impact

Through observations, facilitators noted positive reactions toward peer interactions through Zoom breakout rooms, group discussions, and Slack channel messaging. This was also observed during group projects, suggesting the peer-to-peer interaction components were highlights of the camp. Facilitators also noted high levels of youth engagement during guest lectures where professional remote workers shared experiences, highlighted careers, and discussed best practices. Observed youth interactions indicated an interest in the application of technology and the process of career development. An exit interview provided participants an opportunity to apply their knowledge of remote work skills coupled with college and career readiness skills. The interview activities included preparing a meeting agenda, creating a meeting/interview invite, and conducting a remote interview where they showcased future plans and shared feedback on their experience with the camp.

Facilitating the 4-H Remote Skills Camp presented a unique set of challenges that we were able to address between the two cohorts. The facilitators' scheduled office hours were underutilized by participants in the first cohort and were changed to an appointment system during the second cohort. Youth preferred direct messaging in Slack instead of live, virtual face-to-face office hours. Maintaining a policy of communication during business hours (9am-5pm) in personal time zones enforced the concepts being taught in the modules. Implemented in June and July 2020, the pilot camps corresponded with most summer breaks. This timing allowed the cohorts to easily schedule meetings between time zones and avoid conflicts with work, school, and extracurricular activities.

Public Value and Next Steps

The *4-H Remote Skills Camp: For College and Career Readiness* was piloted to determine whether the learning experience was effective in encouraging the development of skills relevant to remote work. Guest speakers and demonstrations led to a high level of participant interest and should be a future component of this online course. Based on what we learned from this pilot, we recommend including interactive activities in the course coupled with the use of social media platforms for peer engagement. Participants also had positive reactions to group discussions about remote work careers and insights into remote work best practices. While this pilot course relied on observational data, creating an evaluation plan and assessing short-term outcomes such as participants' attitudes and aspirations toward remote work opportunities could enable program improvement. Additionally, based on a recent target audience survey, we recommend implementing a more simplified camp format that would reduce the overall time commitment and make the course more appealing to the target audience of rural high-school youth.

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