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Preparing Youth for Civic Life and Leadership: Evaluating the Washington County 4-H Youth Officer Program

Paul A. Hill & Katarina J. Aikens

Abstract

The Washington County 4-H Youth Officer Program was designed to address youth preparedness for civic life in a democratic society. This program is targeted to students in grades 6-8th, who are at a critical stage in their development as citizens. The program emphasizes experiential learning, which allows youth to learn by doing as they deliver public speeches, visit with elected officials, and facilitate business meetings using Roberts Rules of Order. A total of 24 youth participants completed the program over two years. Evaluation results showed the program was successful in achieving student learning outcomes, with significant improvements in citizenship knowledge and skill levels. Participants were empowered to become actively engaged in positive change in their communities.

Introduction

Many youth lack the knowledge and skills necessary to participate fully in civic life (Shapiro & Brown, 2018a). This is especially true for students in grades 6-8th, who are at a critical stage in their development as citizens (Winthrop, 2020). Unfortunately, many schools do not provide adequate instruction in civics, leaving youth unprepared for the challenges of citizenship in the 21st century (Shapiro & Brown, 2018a).

Civics education helps youth understand how their government works and teaches them about their rights and responsibilities as citizens, which include the right to vote, the right to free speech, and the right to participate in government (Shapiro & Brown, 2018b). As civics education helps youth develop skills to participate fully in civic life, the development of citizenship skills is essential for youth who want to make their voices heard and hold elected officials accountable (Winthrop, 2020). These skills include critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication.

Today's youth are tomorrow's leaders, and it is critical for them to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to be effective citizens in a democratic society (Camino & Zeldin, 2002). The Washington County 4-H Youth Officer Program provides 4-H youth in grades 6-8th with opportunities to learn about citizenship and civic engagement through hands-on activities and projects. Through this program, youth can be empowered to become active participants for positive change in their communities, ensuring a brighter future for themselves and society.

Response & Target Audience

The objective of the Washington County 4-H Youth Officer Program is to help youth develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes they need to be effective citizens in a democratic society. The program uses research-based, best practices to achieve these learning objectives. For example, the program emphasizes experiential learning, which allows youth to learn by doing as they

deliver public speeches, visit with elected officials, and facilitate business meetings using Roberts Rules of Order. The program also emphasizes skill-based projects (e.g., delivering a demonstration, or planning a community service project), which give youth the opportunity to apply what they have learned in real-world situations.

The program was facilitated during July through April 2021-2022 and again in 2022-2023. The target audience was 4-H youth in grades 6-8th living in Washington County. There were 24 total participants ($N = 24$) who applied for the program by completing an entry survey (i.e., application) and an exit survey after the program ended. All participants completed both entry (pre) and exit (post) surveys.

Most youth participants were male (62%), and over half of the female (38%) participants were from minority backgrounds. Overall, 33% of participants reported being from minority backgrounds. With respect to citizenship skills, upon applying for the program, most participants (88%) had not participated in meetings using Roberts Rules of Order or attended meetings with elected officials (87%). In addition, only 4% had experience delivering a public speech or presentation and most (75%) were not aware of issues facing their communities. Moreover, only 20% of participants indicated they were actively engaged in reading about U.S. history, and fewer (8%) were reading about Utah history.

Outcomes & Impact

Results showed that most participants had positive perceptions toward the quality of monthly leadership meetings ($M = 4.67$ out of 5, $SD = .48$) and community tours ($M = 4.75$, $SD = .44$) offered during the Washington County 4-H Youth Officer Program. All youth participants indicated the information provided was either good or very good, and 85% reported that the program was very organized. In addition, most participants (96%) reported that the tour and meetings at the State Capitol were very good.

A paired sample t -test was utilized to examine changes in knowledge. This analysis revealed a statistically significant improvement in the mean scores of citizenship pre- and post-quizzes over the two-year period (Table 1). Notably, an observed decrease in the standard deviation of the participants' scores indicated a trend of reduced variability, suggesting that most participants increased in knowledge together. Findings from Table 1 support the effectiveness of the program in enhancing the citizenship education of participants.

Table 1

Paired Sample t Test Results Assessing Changes in Knowledge of Participants ($N = 24$).

Group	*M diff.	SD	t	df	p (one-tailed)
Youth Participants 2021-2022	28.83	11.65	7.69	11	< .001
Youth Participants 2022-2023	21.67	14.35	5.23	11	< .001

*Note. *M diff.* indicates the mean difference between post-test and pre-test scores (i.e., Post – Pre = *M. diff.*)

Results in Table 2 show positive changes in the skill levels of participants before and after program participation. Prior to the program, a large majority of participants had low skill levels in each of the categories measured. However, after participating, there were improvements in skill levels across all categories. In particular, the percentage of participants with high skill levels in Citizenship increased to 87%, with only 13% having low skill levels after the program. Similarly, in the category of Public Presence, 75% of participants demonstrated higher skill levels after the program, compared to only 13% before the program. These findings suggest that the program was successful in improving the skill levels of participants in a variety of categories.

Table 2

Changes in Skill Level Before and After Program Participation (N = 24).

Items	%	
	Before H/V Skill	After H/V Skill
Roberts Rules of Order	8	71
Public Speaking	8	58
Public Presence	13	75
Citizenship	13	87
U.S. History	13	71
Utah History	13	58

Note. Response categories for each item were: 1 = *Very low*, 2 = *Low*, 3 = *Average*, 4 = *High*, and 5 = *Very high*. High value = HV (4 = *High*, and 5 = *Very high*).

Results from Table 3 demonstrate that most participants indicated they had gained valuable knowledge and skills from the program, with 96% reporting that they had acquired leadership skills they could use, and 92% indicating they had formed Friendships with other 4-H Youth Officers. Additionally, a significant proportion of participants reported gains in Self-confidence, ideas for Volunteering, Self-motivation, Communication skills, and Civic Empowerment. The findings in Table 3 suggest that the program was successful in promoting positive perceptions of knowledge gain among participants.

Table 3

Participants' Perceptions Toward Knowledge Gain from Program Participation (N = 24).

Items	%		
	Yes	No	Unsure
Leadership skills	96	0	4
Friendship	92	0	8
Communication	83	0	17
Volunteering Ideas	79	0	21
Self-motivation	75	4	21
Self-confidence	67	8	25

Civic Empowerment 67 0 33

Note. Response categories for each item were: 1 = *No*, 2 = *Unsure*, 3 = *Yes*.

Findings from Table 4 suggest that the program was successful in enhancing learning outcomes among program participants with the majority of participants agreeing or strongly agreeing with most of the statements. For example, nearly 90% of participants felt they had a deeper understanding of Roberts Rules of Order and could participate in a meeting using those rules. Additionally, over 75% of participants felt they were more aware of community issues and could make positive changes to their civic engagement, while over 80% felt confident in asking questions to elected officials and could prepare and deliver public presentations.

Table 4
Learning Outcomes from Participation in Washington County 4-H Officer Program (N = 24).

Items	%				
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I have a deeper understanding of Roberts Rules of Order	0	4	8	59	29
I can participate in a meeting using Roberts Rules of Order	0	4	8	59	29
I am more aware of the issues facing my community	0	4	25	50	21
I will make positive changes to my civic engagement because of this program	0	0	21	46	33
I have a greater understanding of United States history because of this program	4	13	0	50	33
I have a greater understanding of Utah history because of this program	0	16	13	42	29
I am confident asking questions to elected officials	0	0	25	42	33
I can prepare a public presentation	0	4	25	42	29

I can deliver a public presentation	0	4	21	42	33
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Results in Table 5 suggest that the Washington County 4-H Officer Program had a positive impact on participants' intentions, with most participants indicating that they planned to pursue the activities or behaviors taught and promoted during their training experience. For example, over 70% of participants expressed intent to pursue a leadership opportunity in school or serve as a community leader as an adult, while over 60% expressed intent to volunteer in their community, learn more about U.S. and Utah history, or deliver a public speech. Only a small percentage of participants indicated that they were unsure or already doing these activities.

Table 5

Participants' Intentions from Washington County 4-H Officer Program (N = 24).

Items	%			
	Yes	No	Unsure	Already doing
Learn more about United States history	88	4	4	4
Pursue a leadership opportunity in school	71	8	8	13
Serve as a community leader as an adult	71	8	21	0
Learn more about Utah history	63	4	21	12
Deliver a public speech	63	21	16	0
Make a new friend	63	8	17	12
Volunteer in my community	58	8	21	13
Use Roberts Rules of Order in a meeting	42	4	46	8

Note. Response categories for each item were: 1 = No, 2 = Unsure, 3 = Yes, 4 = Already doing.

Public Value & Next Steps

The Washington County 4-H Youth Officer Program evaluation shows improvement in enhancing civic engagement and citizenship skills among 4-H youth in grades 6-8th. The program has provided youth with opportunities to gain the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to be effective citizens in a democratic society. Specifically, the program's experiential learning approach and skill-based projects have allowed youth to develop their leadership, communication, and civic empowerment skills. Additionally, the program has been successful in introducing youth to Roberts Rules of Order, engaging youth with elected officials, and helping youth become aware of community issues.

The evaluation of the program also revealed room for improvement. Specifically, the program could focus on recruiting more female and minority participants, as well as participants from

different socio-economic backgrounds. Additionally, while the program has been successful in introducing youth to Roberts Rules of Order, the evaluation suggests that more emphasis could be placed on teaching youth how to use this method of meeting facilitation more effectively.

To build on the success of the Washington County 4-H Youth Officer Program and address areas for improvement, it is recommended that the program focus on recruiting participants from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds and measure the success of this recruitment effort. Additionally, the program could consider partnering with local schools and community organizations to recruit participants and broaden its reach. Finally, continued evaluation and assessment of the program will help ensure that it is meeting its objectives and making a positive impact on the development of civic engagement skills among 4-H youth in Washington County.

Overall, the Washington County 4-H Youth Officer Program has demonstrated its value in developing the civic engagement skills of 4-H youth. As the program continues to evolve, it will be important to remain committed to its research-based approach and to making necessary improvements to ensure that it is providing the best possible experience for participants.

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