

Evaluation Report

North Carolina 4-H Congress: Information, Inspiration, and Action

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EVALUATION SUMMARY

4-H Congress is an 85-year tradition bringing together youth ages 9-19 from across North Carolina for a week of hands-on learning, leadership, and service on the North Carolina State University campus. Each year about 200 youth present demonstrations or illustrated talks and 500 participate in a four-hour service project in the Raleigh area. Participants surveyed at the 2006 Congress were more committed to community service and leadership, expanded learning in a 4-H project, and better understanding of current events and citizenship as a direct result of their Congress participation. Teens rated the event climate as high for safety, support, and skill-building.



Candlelight Clover of 4-H Congress delegates assembled to install new state officers and adjourn the conference.

What we know about citizenship and service learning conferences

Competence in citizenship, leadership, and service continues to be a valuable asset for teens to engage their communities today and prepare for larger responsibility as adults (Brockman, Tepper, & MacNeil, 2002; Roebuck, Brockman, & Tepper, 2002). Youth conferences provide the extended, intensive, and interactive environment that experts consider optimal for learning about these topics (Garst, Hunnings, Jameson, Jewel, Meadows, & Herdman, 2006; Michaelson, Zaff, & Hair, 2002). Research on positive youth development indicates that affiliation with positive role models and peers in an educationally-enriched environment that encourages civic engagement and service provides the best foundation for positive development and thriving in early adulthood (Gambone, Klem, & Connell, 2002; Theokas, et al., 2005).

In 2006, the five-day NC 4-H Congress on the NC State University campus was attended by 752 teens, 96 professionals, and 42 volunteer sponsors from 85 of the state's 100 counties. Over 200 teens and qualified younger 4-Hers participated in 40 different categories of public speaking, cookery, or entertainment contests. Senior 4-Hers prepared achievement portfolios and participated in interviews to win trips to national 4-H events. In addition to healthy recreation and friendship building with peers from across the state, youth learned about leadership and teamwork, communication, and a variety of subjects from university faculty and local experts.



Outdoor barbecue is just one of many state presentation and demonstration events at 4-H Congress

Five hundred teens engaged in a 4 hour “Hands-to-Service” community service activity in the Raleigh area, helping the Healing Place of Wake County, UNC-TV, City of Raleigh Parks & Recreation, and Habitat for Humanity and other agencies in Wake County. Youth volunteers completed activities such as salvaging materials from homes, landscaping parks, cleaning facilities, serving lunch, compiling packages, and many other activities that fostered healthy development.



4-H Hands-to-Service at NC 4-H Congress



Town Hall Meeting at NC 4-H Congress

Youth also engaged in a Town Hall discussion, community service projects, and elect organizational leaders. Special activities feature hands-on learning in one area related to the youth-selected theme. In 2006, “Healthy Lifestyle” theme activities included a 4-H fitness and exercise night at Dorton Arena on the NC State Fairgrounds.

How the study was done

NC 4-H staff, volunteers, and youth observed the benefits of 4-H Congress for three generations but conducted no formal evaluation. In 2006, NC 4-H Congress planners posed three critical questions for evaluation:

- 1) Does the conference achieve its key objectives of improving citizenship, leadership, and service capacities of youth?
- 2) Do youth value some events more than others?
- 3) Does the conference provide a quality youth development experience?

Teen participants in the weeklong conference completed the following surveys in their county delegation groups on the last night of the event:

- 1) Conference rating scale, requesting feedback on 12 objectives of the conference;
- 2) Events rating scale, requesting feedback on 15 conference activities;
- 3) Youth program climate scale investigating experiences

The conference and events rating scales were developed as simple content-valid measures to gather feedback on what participants regarded as helpful. Following the TOPS model (Bennett & Rockwell, 1995), the Conference scale focused on short-term outcomes including knowledge and aspirations. Returning participants completed the scale retrospectively and indicated high levels of follow-through (above 80% on all activities listed), suggesting that the Conference scale holds high predictive validity. The Youth Program Climate scale construct validity is grounded on Eccles and Gootman’s (2002) review of program traits that promote positive youth development. Reliability analyses indicated high internal consistency for the Conference scale (Retrospective, alpha = .79; Prospective, alpha = .88), Events scale (alpha = .86), and Climate scale (alpha = .88).

What youth gain from 4-H Congress

On the last night of the conference, 339 full-time delegates who completed the surveys. Results of that feedback are summarized below.

Knowledge and Aspirations. Youth participants were asked to assess gains in knowledge and changes in aspirations that resulted from participation in 4-H Congress. More than three-quarters of delegates reported gains in knowledge of civic issues (80%) and civic responsibilities (80%). Most youth also expanded friendships (95%) and subject-matter knowledge (80%). Participants expressed aspirations to become more involved in community leadership (85%), community service (84%), citizenship (83%), and cultural activities (80%) upon returning home. These high-impact results mirror retrospective reports which returning Congress participants completed at the beginning of the week. Looking back over a year (or more), most returning delegates reported increased knowledge of current issues (76%) and civic responsibilities (85%), and subject-matter (69%). Their aspirations led to increased leadership (82%), citizenship (79%), service (82%), and cultural involvement (58%). A similar pattern was evident for 4-H work, as reported increases in involvement by returning delegates ran slightly lower than projections of current-year participants: participation in project or presentation, or judging event (84% actual vs 83% projected), expanded 4-H involvement (82% vs 89%), application for recognition (59% vs 73%), and recruiting others to 4-H Congress (73% vs 88%). Overall, these results suggest that 4-H Congress is fulfilling its key objectives.

Rating Events. Responses to the Events scale revealed youth overwhelmingly all activities in the 4-H Congress as beneficial but were especially positive about the “Hands-to-Service” experience. Results are encouraging in that youth do express preferences for certain activities but hold positive views of all activities.

Quality Youth Development Experience.

Teen participants agreed that NC 4-H Congress reflected the highest standards of youth development programming through strong adult support, affirmation of youth from all backgrounds, and encouragement of responsibility and social action. Among those teens who attended 4-H Congress:

- 85% felt they could make a difference in the lives of others
 - 94% said they learned to accept differences in others
 - 98% affirmed that serving others and volunteering was important
 - 84% saw activities as relevant to issues in their club, family, and community
 - 88% expanded their view of opportunities beyond their hometown
 - 93% agreed that they had learned to work with others as a team
 - 96% said they learned things that would help them do better in school
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- One hundred percent of participants indicated that they had fun at NC 4-H Congress and 88% planned to attend Congress the next year.



Talented 4-Hers provide their own entertainment for evening events at NC 4-H Congress

Lessons Learned and Recommendations

Youth participants in 4-H Congress strongly affirmed that the event was meeting objectives of building leadership, citizenship, and service in a way that reflected best practice in youth development. What was less clear was how much each separate activity contributes to learning, inspiration, or satisfaction. However, the combination of hands-on interaction with caring and competent peers and adults is consistently related to positive youth development (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Participants enthusiastically affirmed that NC 4-H Congress provides a climate of support, service, skill-building, and social networking. Youth credit NC 4-H Congress for increasing their leadership, citizenship, and service activities throughout the year. These findings suggest that state 4-H Congress is a major source of inspiration and training. 4-H staff might consider how to help participants follow up on individual and club goals, then provide opportunities that enable participants to learn and grow as leaders, engage peers, and apply their ideas in their communities.

NC 4-H staff learned many lessons about the evaluation process itself. Retrospective self-reports on previous year activities offered a quick and efficient way to assess the year—round impact of the conference. Likewise, focus on aspirations or plans for action provided a more behavioral indicator of conference impact than knowledge or attitude questions. Additional documentation could add support and clarity to self-reports but the survey yielded much in a brief time.

The late-night timing of the survey tested the endurance of youth but high reliability and a high percentage of completed surveys suggests that responses were thorough and genuine. Several adult leaders reported insightful discussions arising from the evaluation experience that reinforced the educational and social purpose of the conference. Informal discussions following survey completion and on the return trip home the next day illustrate the value of qualitative methods for evaluating events and for better understanding participants. The number, diversity, and varied impacts of 4-H Congress activities create a rich and valued experience, as reflected in the Knowledge and Aspirations and Youth Climate surveys. However, there may be some value in exploring how and why key activities benefit youth. Future evaluation efforts should focus on determining the quality and impact of specific components of the week-long conference.



Camaraderie within county delegations and new friendships with peers across the state are major benefits of NC 4-H Congress

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