4-H Service Learning Standard and Best Practice Guide

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Introduction

Citizenship and service are vital elements of the Tennessee 4-H Youth Development program. In October 2000, Tennessee 4-H's long-standing dedication to community service was enhanced through a new focus on service learning, a form of experiential learning where students apply knowledge, skills, critical thinking and wise judgment to address genuine community needs (James and Pamela Toole, 1994).

A 1990 study by Search Institute shows that youth who participate in service activities at least one hour a week are half as likely to engage in risky behaviors such as binge drinking, problem drug use and vandalism. According to *Developmental Assets: A Synthesis of the Scientific Research on Adolescent Development*, research shows that community service, volunteering and service learning have been associated, directly or indirectly, with increased self-esteem and self-efficacy, increased pro-social reasoning, more positive attitudes toward adults, increased empathy, increased problem solving skills, increased community involvement as an adult, increased political involvement, positive civic attitudes, leadership in community organizations and increased personal and social responsibility (Leffert and Scales, 1999).

The Tennessee service learning initiative, "4-H Seeds of Service" (4-H S.O.S), was developed through a Learn and Serve America grant under an agreement with the Tennessee Commission on National and Community Service. The program provides training, educational resources, funding opportunities, recognition for outstanding service, and assistance with planning, implementing and evaluating high-quality service learning projects. Service learning has become a popular methodology for helping youth develop life skills, such as problem solving and communication, and knowledge about 4-H projects, such as horticulture and clothing, as they meet community needs.

Since October 2000, more than 182,000 young people and 14,800 adults have partnered to conduct 5,300 service learning projects. They have dedicated more than 585,000 hours to helping 901,000 citizens of their local, national and global communities.

The 4-H Service Learning Standard and Best Practice Guide grew from three years of service learning programming. It is intended to guide 4-H youth and leaders as they discover the needs in their communities and then plan projects to meet those needs.

For more information on service learning, visit the 4-H S.O.S. Website at http://www.utextension.utk.edu/4h/sos, contact the state 4-H office at 865-974-2128 or Lori Jean Mantooth at LMantoo1@utk.edu.

4-H Service Learning Standard

I. Youth Voice
Young people assume active leadership roles in all phases of the service learning project.

II. Community Need and Voice
Service learning project meets a genuine community need, and community members are actively involved in the service learning process.

III. Planning and Training
Group develops an understanding of service learning and prepares for the project through training, teambuilding, project planning and project orientation.

IV. Learning Objectives
Group establishes clear learning goals related to 4-H project work and/or life skills.

V. Service
Group participates in a meaningful service experience.

VI. Reflection
Group sets aside time for meaningful reflection, when members openly express thoughts and emotions about the service.

VII. Evaluation
Group collects feedback from direct and indirect beneficiaries, stakeholders and project volunteers.

VIII. Celebration, Recognition and Reporting
Group celebrates project completion through recognition of volunteers, partners and beneficiaries. Group reports project outcomes to stakeholders.

Youth Voice

Young people assume active leadership roles in all phases of the service learning project.

Youth voice is more than seeking input from youth about project selection. Youth voice is defined as listening to and engaging young people throughout the service learning process. This means that youth have valuable input and roles in all aspects of the service learning experience, from project selection to the type of reflection that is to be conducted. When youth are given a voice and are actively listened to by their adult counterparts, a more successful service learning project is almost guaranteed. Youth bring new energy and ideas to the projects, but are also valuable assets in recruiting, engaging and encouraging other youth.

When working with youth in your service learning project, it is important to listen to them, ask challenging questions, reflect on your own experiences as a young person, be patient and have the courage to set aside your fears. Remember that you should expect the same thing from young people as you would expect of yourself. Don't have unrealistic expectations for your youth leaders. Be straight to the point and be sure the youth know where you are coming from.

It is important to involve youth from the beginning. Avoid tokenism by involving youth early in the process, before all of the decisions are made. Youth should not be shown a completed plan and asked if they like it, so that they only give a "stamp of approval." Remember that youth are resources. Take advantage of their experiences and enthusiasm.

*T*he Grundy County 4-H Honor Club and Outdoor Adventure Club partnered with environmental/biology students, the Ag Business Council, Farm Bureau, the University of the South and other community members to plant wildflowers, construct bird sanctuaries and maintain trails at the high school's outdoor classroom. The young people split into groups and established priorities for the tasks to be completed. They compiled estimates, gathered supplies and finalized details for the project. They conducted a preparation meeting with the partner organizations and adult volunteers to establish a working plan for the project. The youth worked with adults to prepare the project site, distribute and collect evaluations, and plan the celebration of the completion of the project. The adult volunteers learned that the youth of their county have initiative and dedication to see a project to completion. One volunteer commented, "After seeing the success of the Wildflower Project, I would be interested in seeing what other grants might be available for youth/adult service learning projects."

Community Need and Voice

Service learning project meets a genuine community need, and community members are actively involved in the service learning process.

If the goal of our service learning project is to solve problems in communities and provide authentic opportunities for youth, we must make sure we are actively engaging the community in identifying their own needs. By involving the community in identifying needs, the members of that community become partners in solving the issues. Citizenship is fostered in community members and the youth volunteers. An increased awareness of community needs and of individual contributions to the larger society are fostered as well.

Seeking out the voice of the community in the service learning project planning will help ensure that the needs identified are "genuine community needs." A genuine community need is one that is truly needed in the community, not just one that is perceived as a need by those involved in the project planning.

Community need and voice can be found in a number of ways. Interviews with elected officials, surveys, studying facts and data about the community or population to be served and involving recipients of the service in the project planning committee are all ways to ensure that the community's voice is heard.

In Marion County, Jasper Elementary 4-H'ers had class discussions on ways to improve their school campus. They decided they wanted to improve the appearance of the front and main entrance of their school by planting flowers, building picnic benches and improving the existing landscape. The young people discussed, brainstormed and wrote ideas on ways to achieve their goal of making improvements at Jasper Elementary. In reading class, they wrote essays on why they wanted to be involved in the project; in math class, they discussed the money needed to fund the project; and in science class, they discussed the plants and flowers that would enhance the campus. As they reflected on their experience after the project, the 4-H'ers were already hoping to extend their service to other areas of the large campus.

Planning and Training

Group develops an understanding of service learning and prepares for the project through training, teambuilding, project planning and project orientation.

Thorough planning and preparation are as vital to a successful service learning project as the service itself. Orientation and training can prepare youth to go into unfamiliar situations, clarify expectations, reduce liability and create a better learning environment.

After your group identifies a community need and selects a project to meet that need, you should plan the project as completely as possible. Organize all the logistics: who will be doing what and when they'll be doing it, transportation details, a contact person in case of an emergency, etc. Every volunteer (young and not-as-young) needs to be oriented to and trained for the project. Make sure that the group knows what to expect about the service site, the people they'll meet there and any rules or regulations that may apply. Take time to train the group for the service, whether their task will be moving nursing home residents in wheelchairs or putting siding on a Habitat for Humanity house.

This stage of the cycle is also the time for building a sense of "team" within the group. Icebreakers can shatter any initial shyness, while teambuilding activities help the group to bond and establish a comfort level that will enable them to work well together and share more openly during reflection times.

*W*hen Campbell County 4-H'ers and volunteer leaders were planning to teach several workshops at a local nursing home, they knew they had a lot to prepare. They knew they wanted to sponsor fun activities with the residents, including farm day, scrapbooking, games of yesterday and today, and clowning. Before they implemented their project, the group had "sensitivity training" to equip them with skills in communicating with older adults and understanding their needs, both emotionally and physically. A nurse taught the young people how to maneuver wheelchairs, a professional clown presented a clowning workshop and a scrapbooking professional taught the youth proper techniques for the craft. Because of their careful planning and training, the group could report that "the HEART of each of the sessions with the residents was the one-on-one contact … from shooting marbles or creating a scrapbook page to experiencing the touch of a chicken."

Learning Objectives

Group establishes clear learning goals related to 4-H project work and/or life skills.

In 4-H, everything that we do is in some way linked to learning. Whether it is 4-H project work, life skills, citizenship or leadership, 4-H work is full of learning opportunities and objectives. These learning objectives are just as significant in the service learning process. It is important to determine the learning objectives early in the project planning phase. Be sure to include direct links to 4-H project work as well as identifying life skill areas that the 4-H'ers can learn through participation in the service learning project. By identifying learning objectives early, your group can more easily reflect on them throughout the service learning experience. It is important to remember that your learning objectives should be developmentally appropriate for the age group you are working with.

Youth can be great resources in identifying what they can learn through the service learning project as well as what they want to learn. A great place to begin looking at learning objectives is in the 4-H project books. What type of service learning project can assist you as a 4-H leader in providing learning opportunities that address the learning objectives?

*I*n Haywood County, 4-H youth and Extension personnel created a unique way to train judging teams in interior and landscape design. In particular, the group wanted to learn landscape design and interior design, including how to arrange furniture. As part of the project called "Dazzling Design," 4-H'ers helped design the interiors and landscaping for a Habitat for Humanity home. Extension specialists and agents taught the young people about good landscape design techniques, furniture arrangement and good proportions for interior design, and presentation boards for their plans. The president of the local Habitat for Humanity told the youth about Habitat and answered questions concerning the project. Then, the youth paired up and created designs for two rooms in the house and one landscape design per team. Each team presented their ideas to the family who would live in the house. The family chose the designs they wanted, and the young people assisted in implementing their plans.
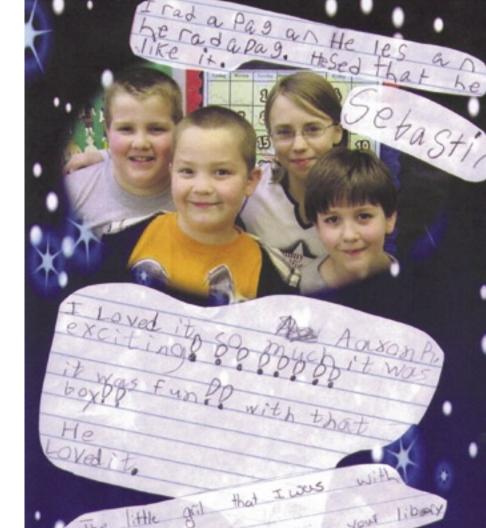
Service

Group participates in a meaningful service experience.

After all your careful needs assessment and project planning, it's now time for action. Meaningful action occurs when youth and adults work together to set goals, plan the service and address some of the inherent barriers that young people can face in service learning projects. Project planning is the core of meaningful action. One of the key reasons young people cite for not serving is feeling like they are not engaged or used effectively. So, make sure that the young people are involved in the service learning project from the very beginning and, on the actual day(s) of service, engage all volunteers in the activity.

Taking time to think through project goals, roles for volunteers, key logistics and other issues can create a sense of purpose and bolster retention of young volunteers. Unfortunately, no amount of planning and preparation can guarantee a completely problem-free service day. If problems arise, turn them into "teachable moments" and look on them as an added learning opportunity.

*A*t Ashland City Elementary in Cheatham County, the Williams' 4th grade 4-H club wanted more opportunities to practice their reading skills, so they created "reading adventure kits" for younger students. The 4-H'ers practiced easy readers until they could read them perfectly. Then they recorded the books on tape and assembled kits that also included manipulatives related to the stories, a laminated activity/ question sheet and a cassette player. The 4-H'ers spent time reading with a 1st grade class and then placed the kits in the school library for all students to enjoy. Ms. Williams, the club's teacher-leader, said, "This is the most rewarding project I have ever been involved with! I can honestly say I was moved to tears to watch my [students] interacting with the 1st graders. They were coming up with many ways to engage the smaller kids in reading the story they had chosen. After visiting the primary school, my students were so excited and very proud of themselves. We definitely accomplished our goals."

Reflection

Group sets aside time for meaningful reflection, when members openly express thoughts and emotions about the service.

Reflection is the key to service learning. Without it, your group has only conducted a community service project with good learning objectives. Reflection is the time for young people to look at what they did, to examine how it impacted them and to explore what they can do with the knowledge they gained through the experience. It's simply answering three questions: What? So what? and Now what? Reflection needs to be intentional and planned and happen at the beginning, middle and end of the project. It helps to keep youth focused, to gauge progress toward learning objectives and to evaluate the effectiveness of the project and skills gained.

Reflection activities can be as varied as the youth themselves. Think of creative ways to get young people to think about the project and how they learned through it. The group can write, talk, sing, act, sculpt, draw or engage in any activity that helps them reflect on the service. The key ingredient is the sense of team that you built before and during the project. Once the group feels comfortable together, the members are more likely to openly discuss their reactions to the project and take their learning to an even deeper level.

*A*fter conducting two service learning projects for local nursing homes and daycare centers, an after-school 4-H club in Gibson County combined their reflection activities with community needs assessment for their next project. Each 4-H'er had two cut-outs of hands; on one they drew pictures of how they thought the people who received their gifts felt, and on the other they drew pictures of how they felt doing the project. Then they drew a "World of Service," in which they created a "perfect world" and discussed the differences between that world and their own community. They taped the "World of Service" to the wall with the handprints around the globe to show that if they all worked together they could make their community a better place.

Evaluation

Group collects feedback from direct and indirect beneficiaries, stakeholders and project volunteers.

During and after the project, take time to evaluate the service. Evaluation is a type of reflection at the program level that allows the group to analyze their service efforts, document the results and engage in continuous improvement. You can evaluate every stage of the project, from community needs assessment through reflection. Find out what worked, what didn't work and what you can improve for next time.

Evaluation is more effective when you ask volunteers, beneficiaries, stakeholders and other community members to evaluate the project. Don't focus on only one group, because each person has a different perspective of the same picture and can offer a comprehensive look at the service. Also, don't ask questions just for the sake of asking. Make sure that you genuinely care about the information you're collecting and that you can and will use it to improve the program.

The Giles County 4-H Honor Club conducted a Leadership and Character Development Camp for 6th – 8th grade students in the county. Along with a service learning project for the entire group, the teen leaders conducted educational programs on the Six Pillars of Character – trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship – and leadership styles. The group evaluated their service efforts through questionnaires and comments from campers, parents and leaders. According to the camper evaluations, 94 percent of participants learned more about being a good citizen, 87 percent gained self-confidence and 100 percent learned about being a good leader. When asked about the effectiveness of the service learning project, leaders and beneficiaries gave the camp an average rating of 4.67 on a 5-point scale.

Celebration, Recognition and Reporting

Group celebrates project completion through recognition of volunteers, partners and beneficiaries, and group reports project outcomes to stakeholders.

While designing the service learning project, your group should plan ways to celebrate the service and recognize the volunteers and any others who helped along the way, including community members, elected officials, parents, donors and the beneficiaries themselves. It's a great idea to invite the beneficiaries to the celebration, so they can also have a sense of closure and an opportunity to thank the volunteers for their service. Although celebration should be fun and exciting, it can also reinforce the other stages of the project by drawing attention to community needs, highlighting learning objectives and showcasing reflection exercises.

Reporting the service learning project is another way to celebrate the accomplishment. Whether the group submits a report to the state 4-H office, writes an article for the local paper or creates a display for the county fair, the young people will be recognized and celebrated by the community for their contributions.

Celebration, recognition and reporting should not be the end of your service experience. Use this time together to start planning the next project. Where can you go from here? The answer: anywhere you want!

*F*or National 4-H Week, Sevier County 4-H'ers were "Hooked on Helping Hunger." With a slogan of "One Can, Can Make a Difference," all 4-H'ers were encouraged to donate one can of tuna or $.50 for the Sevier County Food Ministry. The Honor Club and All Stars visited the Food Ministry and produced a short video promoting the project, which was shown in classrooms and over Channel One at the schools. The Service Chairmen from 101 4-H clubs brought their clubs' donations to the countywide officers workshop for "The Great Tuna Weigh-in." The officers celebrated the project that night with the director of the Food Ministry. At each school, the club that collected the most donations for the project celebrated with a pizza party and reflection activities. The countywide project was reported through two articles in the local newspaper and on the 4-H Seeds of Service and Sevier County Extension Web sites.

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