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Background

The purpose of this study is to identify the needs of Millennial and Generation Y 4-H volunteers. Making the Best Better: Assessing the Needs of Millennial & Gen Y UConn 4-H Volunteers, will conduct focus groups, analyze the data, and make recommendations to the UConn 4-H team on how to recruit, retain, and support these volunteers. For the purposes of this project Millennial and Generation Y individuals were born between 1981 to 1996.

Millennial and Gen Y 4-H volunteers make up a smaller portion of the current 4-H volunteers in Connecticut. However, these audiences will help sustain and expand the UConn 4-H program in the future. Harrington et al (2021) stated that volunteers, specifically 4-H volunteers, have personal benefits, as well as organizational and community benefits. Their assessment of 4-H volunteers in 12 states found the top two reasons among all demographics surveyed were skills gained and used in other settings and improving interpersonal skills (Harrington et al., 2021).

Methods

This study was funded by a UConn Extension Program Development and Evaluation Mini Grant. The mini grant was \$5,000 dollars and provided funds for a third-party focus group facilitator, student labor for transcripts, travel, and meals for participating 4-H volunteers. An IRB application was submitted and approved.

Participants were recruited through various emails including a general email to all registered 4-H Volunteers in Z-Suite (UConn 4-H Enrollment System), emails sent through county staff, and an additional email sent specifically to volunteers that met the age requirements of the study. Fliers were published on the UConn 4-H social media.

Quantitative results were averaged for each group whereas qualitative discussion was coded using NVIVO software. We identified codes and created a code book for data analysis. The codes are collaboration, commitment, communication, community, difficulties and challenges, giving back, leadership and mentorship, outreach, and professional development. There were also sub-codes for some of the codes.

Making the Best Better: Assessing the Needs of Millennial & Gen Y UConn 4-H Volunteers

Findings

We collected quantitative and qualitative data through the sessions and follow-up survey. There were 15 participants representing six of Connecticut counties. Most participants (76.9%) identified themselves as 4-H alumni, and the average length of volunteer service with 4-H was 8.6 years. They also estimated spending 180 hours per year, or 30 hours per month, volunteering with UConn 4-H, however, seasonality was consistently mentioned, meaning the number of volunteer hours was higher at peak times throughout the year. We analyzed coding density (Table 1). We also coded sentiment, and as expected by the types of questions asked, we had a higher percentage of negative sentiment, however, participants were positive about the program overall.

Outreach had the highest number of coding references with 48, and the highest aggregate at 93. Aggregate included secondary coding, the data from other codes that overlapped, facilitator observations, and themes. Participants identified their top three reasons for volunteering as (1) giving back, (2) community building, and (3) personal fulfillment.



Code	Number of References	Aggregate
Outreach	48	93
Communication	44	51
Giving Back	35	56
Difficulties & Challenges	32	66
Collaboration	30	30
Community	27	27
Outreach/Electronic	23	23

Next Steps

Recruitment and retention of 4-H volunteers across demographics is essential to the continued development of volunteers. Attracting, supporting, and retaining the millennial and Gen Y generations of 4-H volunteers is essential to the sustainability of 4-H programming.

The locations and modalities used to attract millennials and Gen Y volunteers need to be expanded to the arenas in which they operate. These include on-line platforms, fairs, music festivals, farmer's markets.

Communications strategies within this population need to engage technology. Participants noted a desire for digital communication methods. Opportunities for volunteers to engage in episodic opportunities, short-term commitment experiences and roles that are appropriate for their current lifestyle are essential to avoiding burn-out.

Acknowledgements

These focus groups and associated findings allow the 4-H team a first-person perspective of the strengths and weaknesses of the 4-H program and how programming can be shaped to fit the needs of these critical volunteers. With an increasing need to recruit volunteers for the growing 4-H program this research is key in identifying factors that recruit and retain volunteers. Future research in identifying similar characteristics of Generation Z volunteers was also identified as needed next steps for additional research in recruiting and retaining the next generation of volunteers.

Harrington, R., Good, T., O'Neil, K., Grant, S., Maass, S., Vettern, R., & McGlaughlin, P. (2021). Value of Assessing Personal, Organizational, and Community Impacts of Extension Volunteer Programs. The Journal of Extension, 59(2), Article 6. <u>https://doi.org/10.34068/joe.59.02.06</u>

