Work-Based Learning Goes to Camp

Using the principles for quality work-based learning programs, educators can create an intentional approach that blends workforce preparation and camp counseling. They can modify their camp counselor training and use teen self-assessments and supervisor assessments to evaluate the work experience of the camp counselors.

Preparing youth for the workforce has taken on new meaning in the knowledge economy of the 21st century. Employers, educators, and community leaders are concerned about a lack of connection between skills young adults have and those needed for success in the workplace (Business-Higher Education Forum, 2003; Casner-Lotto, 2006).

Furthermore, many jobs available to teens do not provide them with opportunities that might enhance their development and help them to build the necessary workforce skills.

Previous research has documented that the Ohio 4-H camp counselor program develops important workforce skills through opportunities to practice teamwork, social skills, and initiative (Digby & Ferrari, 2007; Ferrari & McNeely, 2007).

However, because teens did not seem to make the connection between skills developed through camp counseling and skills needed to be successful in the workplace (Ferrari & McNeely, 2007), and because of the complementary nature of positive youth development and workforce preparation (Cochran & Ferrari, 2009), we believed a more intentional approach would add greater value to this existing program.

With approximately 7 million youth members and 500,000 volunteers, 4-H is the nation’s largest youth program (Kress, 2006). With a focus on life skills and positive youth development, by their very nature youth programs such as 4-H are already contributing to workforce readiness regardless of whether or not they offer a specific program geared toward developing workforce skills.

Studies of current 4-H members and program alumni document that skills such as leadership, communication, and teamwork are gained through program participation (Digby & Ferrari, 2007; Ferrari, Lekies, & Arnett, 2008; Fox, Schroeder, & Lodl, 2003; Maass, Wilken, Jordan, Culen, & Place, 2006; Matulis, Hedges, Barrick, & Smith, 1988; McKinley, 1999).

However, youth programs can make an even greater impact when they adopt a more intentional focus on the complementary nature of a positive youth development approach and workforce preparation goals (Cochran & Ferrari, 2008, 2009; Ferrari, Arnett, & Cochran, 2008).
Studies of current 4-H members and program alumni document that skills such as leadership, communication, and teamwork are gained through program participation (Bennett, 2009; Ferrari, Lekies, & Arnett, 2009; Fox, Schroeder, & Lidl, 2003; Maass, Wilken, Jordan, Culen, & Place, 2006; Matulis, Hedges, Barrick, & Smith, 1988; McKinley, 1999). Members and alumni are able to articulate how 4-H has helped to prepare them for the future and how 4-H influenced their career path. Thus, 4-H can be said to contribute to workforce readiness in both direct and indirect ways.

4-H programs use several delivery modes that emphasize a learn-by-doing experiential education philosophy. Camping is one of these delivery modes, and there is a long history of camp programs in 4-H (Wessel & Wessel, 1982) and in Ohio (McNeely, 2004). A review of national enrollment data indicates that participation in 4-H resident camping is increasing (National 4-H Headquarters, 2008; USDA, n.d.), and Ohio has one of the largest 4-H camping programs in the country (McNeely, 2004). The 2008 enrollment statistics show that 15,387 Ohio 4-H youth participated in overnight camping. Each year, approximately 2,500 teens participate as 4-H camp counselors in Ohio and about 60% of them are returning from a previous year (McNeely, 2004).

Ohio uses a county-based model for its camp program, where each county runs a camp program staffed with teen camp counselors who are selected and trained by the county 4-H professional. These teen counselors assume significant responsibility for planning and conducting programs for younger campers during their county camp. County 4-H professionals provide counselor training and facilitate the camping experience with these two audiences in mind. Depending on the size of the county’s camping program, the number of counselors per county ranges from approximately 20 to 40 teens.

Camp counselors desire to create a positive, fun experience for their campers, often because they have fond memories of their own camp experiences and how they looked up to their counselors (Digby & Ferrari, 2007). Counselors are aware that their position requires them to be a role model. They work as part of a team to create a successful camp, working closely with another counselor to share responsibility for a group of younger campers. It is a 24/7 responsibility, as they live together in a cabin, facilitate group interactions, and supervise activities of daily living such as cabin clean up and dining hall duties. The bonding and friendships they develop are a source of great satisfaction (Brandt & Arnold, 2006; Digby & Ferrari, 2007). Many describe it as the highlight of their 4-H experience.

In contrast to states that use paid staff, the Ohio 4-H camp counselor role is a volunteer position. Typically, counselor selection is made at the beginning of the year, with counselors completing an application as part of the selection process. The use of applications and interviews serves a practical purpose of selecting counselors, but is also used intentionally to prepare members for future situations such as job interviews. Training sessions are conducted between January and May in their respective counties. Ohio 4-H follows the American Camp Association (citation) guidelines for 24 hours of training on topics such as behavior management, etc. The counselors are also involved in planning the camp program (e.g., deciding on a theme, creating campfire programs). Camp programs occur during the summer at one of 14 different locations around the state and are typically four- to five days long.
Youth development professionals are interested in helping youth develop to their fullest potential. Adolescence is a time when young people are expected to acquire a range of skills that will help them to make a successful transition to college, work, and adulthood (Lippman, Atienza, Rivers, & Keith, 2008; Zarrett & Eccles, 2006).

Therefore, youth development professionals must intentionally design programs to assist youth to accomplish these developmental outcomes (Walker, 2006; Walker, Marczak, Blyth, & Borden, 2005). Camp counseling is one such opportunity to engage young people in a rich context for positive youth development and workforce preparation.

Past research has provided evidence that the conditions present in the 4-H camp counseling experience make it a particularly conducive context for development (Digby & Ferrari, 2007; Ferrari & McNeely, 2007). Being a camp counselor requires significant motivation and focused attention, which Larson (2000) notes are necessary for the development of initiative.

In addition, counselors have challenging, meaningful roles and carry out real responsibilities, which are the type of experiences that teens desire (Arbreton, Bradshaw, Metz, Sheldon, & Pepper, 2008; Chaskin & Baker, 2006; Hansen & Larson, 2007; Harris, 2008; Pearce & Larson, 2006), and which also contribute to initiative development and engagement in learning (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). The challenging nature of camp counseling means that teens are actively engaged, making it more likely that they will achieve desired developmental outcomes (Walker, 2006; Walker, Marczak, Blyth, & Borden, 2005).

As a result of their camp experiences, counselors note that they develop leadership, teamwork, problem solving, and communication skills (Brandt & Arnold, 2006; Digby & Ferrari, 2007; Ferrari & McNeely, 2007). Because they get to try out adult role, camp counseling is also a context for identity development (Brandt & Arnold, 2006; Digby & Ferrari, 2007; Ferrari & McNeely, 2007), with direct and indirect career influences (Digby & Ferrari, 2007).

As with any youth development program, adult leaders play an important role (Grossman & Bulle, 2006; Rhodes, 2004, and 4-H is no exception. Recent research has shown that support from volunteer leaders mediates the relationship between the 4-H context and youth outcomes (Fogarty, Terry, Pracht, & Jordan, 2009). However, interactions with adults can also be negative (Albright & Ferrari, 2010, Dworkin & Larson, 2006). Thus, it is important to establish that youth are experiencing positive relationships with adult leaders.

The 4-H youth development professionals who facilitate the camp counseling program support counselors’ skill development by allowing them to assume responsibility for planning and implementing the camp program. However, as Larson and Walker (2005) note, a skilled adult facilitator must judge what sort of support is needed and shift strategies as the situation demands.

Camp counseling is an activity that fits well with the developmental needs of its participants, which is referred to as stage-environment fit (Eccles et al., 1993).
Making the Connection
Camp Counselor Skills & Employability Skills

The experiential nature of camp counseling provides an excellent opportunity to develop such skills and allows the teen counselors to connect their 4-H experiences with skills needed in the workforce.

According to the American Camp Association (2010), camps employ 1.2 million adults in a variety of positions. Although directors are often full-time, year-round positions, counselor positions are usually seasonal; often they are filled by young people as a summer job during college. There are not likely to be many individuals who are camp counselors as a teen or young adult who continue this as a long-term career.

Therefore, teens may mistakenly think that being camp counselor does not prepare them for their future careers, because they do not realize the type of skills valued by employers may in fact be gained during their camp counseling experience.

Previous research has documented that the Ohio 4-H camp counselor program develops important workforce skills through opportunities to practice teamwork, social skills, and initiative (Digby & Ferrari, 2007; Ferrari & McNeely, 2007). These are important workforce skills valued by employers (Levy & Murnane, 2006; Murnane & Levy, 1996; Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2003; SCANS, 1991).

However, teens did not seem to make the connection between skills developed through camp counseling and skills needed to be successful in the workplace (Ferrari & McNeely, 2007), and a more intentional approach is needed to help teens make this connection.

Furthermore, because of the complementary nature of positive youth development and workforce preparation (Cochran, Catchpole, Arnett, & Ferrari, 2010; Cochran & Ferrari, 2009; Ferrari, Arnett, & Cochran, 2008), it is believed that a more intentional approach would add greater value to this existing camp counselor program.

Most youth learn best when they are active participants in their own education—“learning by doing.” By following the steps within the Experiential Learning Model, youth can obtain a better understanding of how...
Incorporating Workforce Skills into the Camp Counselor Experience

The literature on transfer of learning provides a way to shed some light on how what youth are learning is actually practiced in the work setting. Mayer & Wittrock (1996) defined transfer as “when a person’s prior experience and knowledge affect learning or problem solving in a new situation” (p. 48). The concerns about the lack of connection between school and work worlds implies that at least part of the problem is with transfer of learning.

It is believed that one reason that camp counselors do not automatically make the connection between what they are learning in that role and how those skills can be applied is because transfer cannot be taken for granted. Strategies must be implemented intentionally to ensure that it occurs. Camp counseling already uses active learning strategies, which enhance transfer, but such strategies alone are like not sufficient. Therefore, one must also incorporate reflection to promote the transfer of workforce skills from one setting to another. The changes to the camp counselor training are designed to make these connections an intentional part of the program.

Camp Counseling & Work-Based Learning

Previous research has documented that the Ohio 4-H camp counselor program develops important workforce skills through opportunities to practice teamwork, social skills, and initiative (Digby & Ferrari, 2007; Ferrari & McNeely, 2007). Therefore camp counseling is already helping prepare youth for future employment.

The Ohio 4-H camp counseling program is a great program producing great results. However, by viewing camp counseling through a different lens, a workforce preparation lens, a good program can become an even better one. Educators can emphasize to youth the skills that they learn as counselors, such as leadership, teamwork, and communication, are the same skills that employers value in the workplace.

By intentionally showing program participants how the skills they learn as camp counselors can be used in their current lives and in the future, we can transform their experience into a high quality work-based learning experience. The original goals of the program are accomplished, as well as additional goals related to workforce preparation.

When educators emphasize to youth that the skills they are developing are the same skills that are important for the workplace and in life in general, it allows youth to see the additional benefits they gain from participating. The experiential nature of camp counseling provides an excellent opportunity to develop workforce skills and allows the teen counselors to connect their 4-H experiences with skills needed in the workforce.

We believe that adopting an intentional approach to workforce preparation such as with the efforts described here will enhance the perception that 4-H is contributing to the skills needed for productive adulthood. Ultimately, those who participate as 4-H camp counselors will be better prepared for the workforce and will be able to use the experience gained as a camp counselor to assist them with gaining future employment.
Evaluating the Camp Counselor Work-Based Learning Experience

Journaling
The purpose of using journaling is to help teens reflect and critically examine their work experience. Journals can be used to explore 21st century or applied skills which enable new workforce entrants to use basic knowledge they have acquired in school to perform in the workplace. The assignments within the journals should be designed with the teen in mind to help them reflect on their experiences. Teens should be notified that they are expected to complete each assignment by the due date assigned to it.

Having teens complete journal pages by due dates is an important aspect to using journaling and can be compared to other necessary paperwork on the job.

An example to demonstrate the point is that the teen’s supervisor must complete and submit the teen’s timesheets on time for them to get paid, an obvious expectation of the teen.

The journal should be designed to be worked through by each teen at a pace that fits the length of the work experience. Added benefit is gained by having peer team meetings facilitated by a staff member every two weeks and using the journal topics to guide the discussion.

It is best to design a journal with a quick reference of important dates and contact information so that essential information is at everyone’s fingertips. Following the dates could be a blank timesheet of which the teens can complete throughout the experience. Getting teens to use some sort of a time tracking form is a good way for them to determine how many hours they really spend performing their job.

Journaling worksheets can include an assessment of the teens’ 21st century skills, pages to explore the place where they work, who they work with, how they are performing, as well as what skills they can continue to improve. Activities and lessons from the Close Encounters with the World of Work Activity Guide would be a good addition to the journal. Other ideas include worksheets to engage the teens in thinking about future careers and learning how others have viewed their progress over the work period.

Performance Appraisals
A performance appraisal process can be used to collect workforce skills data as it represents an authentic means to evaluating skills gained in work-based learning programs. Through the use of a performance appraisal process, educators can document the acquisition of workforce skills by 4-H camp counselors.

Two versions of performance appraisals are recommended to fully document the acquisition of skills by the counselors; a Teen Self-Assessment and a Supervisor Assessment.

The measure uses a retrospective pre-post design to obtain two assessments—before participation and after participation—that are collected at the program’s conclusion. The measure also asks for open-ended responses to elicit narrative descriptions; both counselors and supervisors provided written comments addressing overall strengths and areas for growth.

Teen Self-assessment
The teen self-assessment includes questions address important workplace skills and competencies. Teens rate themselves in the sections and write comments that apply in the “Teen Comments” space provided. The evaluation is given to the teens’ supervisor and the supervisor should schedule a time to meet with each teen and discuss the evaluation.

Supervisor Assessment
This instrument was designed as a tool to provide teens in a work-based learning program with feedback on their performance and how well they completed the program objectives. The assessment is to be filled out by the teen’s supervisor at the completion of the work-based learning experience. The questions address important workplace skills and competencies.

“Being a camp counselor helped me to think about my future in ways I never thought before, like what employers’ value and what people expect from you.”

— 4-H Camp Counselor
End of Program Celebration
During the final week of the program is the perfect opportunity to have a celebration where participants gather together to share positive summer experiences. The celebration could involve a slideshow of pictures from counselor training and camp. This would also be a good time to conduct exit interviews and give teens the opportunity to share their experiences with each other.

Work-based Learning: Sample Programming and Evaluation Tools
The following examples were developed by state and local Extension professionals and may be adapted for other work-based learning programs.

**JET Program Package (pdf)** - A detailed packet of information describing the Job Experience Training (JET) Program; work-based learning; and the components of the JET program experience including the interview process, orientation, training, evaluations and more.

**Performance Appraisal (pdf)** - To be completed by teens and supervisors at the conclusion of the work-based learning program. Available at: [http://youthsuccess.osu.edu/?attachment_id=1196](http://youthsuccess.osu.edu/?attachment_id=1196)

**Teen Self-Assessment (pdf)** – To be completed by teens at the conclusion of the work-based learning program.
Available at: [http://youthsuccess.osu.edu/?attachment_id=1205](http://youthsuccess.osu.edu/?attachment_id=1205)