

10-28-2021

Engaging Corporate Partners to Build Your 4-H Program: Tips for Success

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Recommended Citation

Staffen, M., Meek, A., Hecht, B., & Anderson, P. (2021). Engaging Corporate Partners to Build Your 4-H Program: Tips for Success. *The Journal of Extension*, 59(4), Article 7. <https://doi.org/10.34068/joe.59.04.07>

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Cover Page Footnote

The Science Matters program that was used as a case study for this articles included multiple team members who contributed to sharing ideas and best practices highlighted in this article; including Extension staff and Bayer employees. We would like to acknowledge all who contributed to the success of Science Matters.

Engaging Corporate Partners to Build Your 4-H Program: Tips for Success

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Abstract. This article discusses best practices learned from a corporate partnership between Bayer, 4-H county programs in Missouri, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania; and National 4-H Council. This corporate partnership has blossomed into a multi-level engagement that is offering unique opportunities for both Bayer and 4-H programs at the local and state level. Authors share lessons learned that can be utilized for colleagues to leverage mutually beneficial corporate partnership to expand their work in the community.

INTRODUCTION

Following trends in higher education, Extension is employing fewer staff members than in previous years; this has changed 4-H implementation plans at both the state and county levels (Gillespie & Kinder, 2010). Consequently, 4-H professionals must maximize their resources and devise creative ways for 4-H programming to continue to meet the needs of communities. One strategy is leveraging corporate partnerships. Corporate partnerships can elevate 4-H programming in many ways, from engaging new volunteers to supporting program fundraising goals (Pritchett et al., 2012).

In 2016, Bayer and the National 4-H Council launched Science Matters, a program geared to develop a partnership with 4-H in five targeted communities. This model of partnership—supported by National 4-H—connects corporations to local 4-H programs as a way to provide positive youth development experiences and serves as a gateway for Extension professionals to explore opportunities for corporate engagement.

The partnership between Bayer and 4-H has enhanced community development through project-based learning experiences that enable youth and corporate employees to explore community-based issues and solutions. Additionally, it has provided 4-H professionals with an opportunity to share best practices that may help others who are considering using corporate partnerships to increase their capacity. This article discusses the rewards and challenges to corporate partnership models from the experiences of the state leads using the Science Matters program as an example of a successful partnership. The authors share lessons they learned from the experience that other Extension professionals can apply to their own contexts to develop and nurture corporate partnerships.

AN EXAMPLE OF CORPORATE ENGAGEMENT

The goal of the Science Matters program is to equip 25,000 youth with the tools and support needed to deepen their understanding of agriscience and provide resources to support a continued interest and passion in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) education. For two years, small grants were given to 4-H programs, and state leads were connected to a Bayer employee point person to support partnership building.

Bayer volunteers invited youth to their facilities, where they could visit manufacturing labs, participate in career panels, learn about current Bayer projects, and interact with Bayer volunteers. Bayer volunteers worked alongside youth participants to teach what they learned through hands-on workshops and showcases in their community. Bayer provided scholarships for youth to attend the National 4-H Youth Summit on Agri-Science where youth gained a broader perspective of modern agriculture, related careers and the challenges of feeding a

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growing world population. As a result of this partnership, youth have developed life skills, gained new perspectives about science and agriculture, and have been inspired to tackle world issues.

Since the initial two-year program, Science Matters has grown into a multifaceted partnership for Bayer and 4-H. Bayer continues to be involved locally with the 4-H programs they supported initially, leading STEM workshops at 4-H fairs and other community events. In many states, Bayer continues to offer facility tours for youth and families and provide sponsorships for local 4-H projects, including fireworks at the county fair and resources for a 4-H community garden.

LESSONS LEARNED

To better navigate partnership building with Bayer, state leads shared ideas and lessons learned at monthly meetings with the National 4-H project manager and each other. Managing the Science Matters program has provided the state leads with relevant experience to continue to navigate corporate partnerships to support a growing 4-H program. Some examples of other corporate partnerships developed by the state leads include those with Apple, Wiley, Oil Region Alliance, Optum, Nutrien, Lockheed Martin, Walmart, and TD Ameritrade. Some of these partnerships have been leveraged by the support of the National 4-H Council, while others have been developed through direct outreach of 4-H professionals.

Through this work, state leads have realized several best practices for building and sustaining corporate partnerships. These practices inform professionals for beginning and sustaining partnerships to be mutually beneficial for both the corporate partner and community organization. The tips below come from a collection of reports and the debrief meetings from both state leads and corporate collaborators.

- **Consider that corporate volunteers may not have experience working with youth.** 4-H has existing resources to train adults in positive youth development, curriculum planning, experiential learning, and youth safety, which can be tailored to train corporate volunteers.
- **Recognize the content-based skills that our corporate volunteers can share.** These can include skills they use in their everyday work or those used for unrelated hobbies. Share relevant curricula that can help volunteers teach effectively (Ripberger & Blalock, 2015).
- **Corporate volunteers often have comp time.** In many cases, corporate volunteers can spend a set number of hours during the work week to volunteer without using sick leave or other limited options for paid time off (Grant, 2012).
- **All volunteers like to be recognized for their efforts.** Traditional 4-H volunteer recognition strategies, like certificates and thank you cards, work well. It is a great idea to also recognize the company by using their logo on marketing materials or tagging them on social media.
- **Corporations often have budgets available to support community projects.** Do not underestimate the time and resources it takes to manage volunteers and coordinate programs. It is appropriate to ask for funding or greater in-kind support for supplies, corporate-sponsored catering, or other needs.
- **Think outside the box when offering volunteer opportunities.** Consider engaging volunteers in short-term projects like judging, leading a workshop, and presenting on a career panel.
- **Partnerships are mutually beneficial.** All parties benefit by sharing resources and expertise to achieve greater impact. Corporate volunteers often feel fulfilled when giving back to their community; community organizations benefit from enhanced programming. To get started in this type of partnership, 4-H professionals should consider what companies in their community may align with their program goals (Brockner, 2014).
- **Setting realistic goals for everyone's time.** When partnerships evolve, it can be tempting for volunteers, staff, and youth to want to “do it all,” which can cause burn out. Be sure to help manage realistic timelines and expectations for all.

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CONCLUSION

The partnership between Bayer and 4-H has made a positive impact on 4-H programs by providing youth with new experiences and county programs with additional resources to lead positive youth development programming. Valuable lessons learned inspired new corporate partnerships in several communities. 4-H professionals need to find creative solutions to remain effective in growing positive youth development experiences, and corporate partnerships serve as a viable solution to expand 4-H programming to a greater audience with meaningful, research-based programming.

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