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National 4-H Congress: A Retrospective Evaluation

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National 4-H Congress: A Retrospective Evaluation

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National 4-H Congress is an example of a programmatic effort designed to help youth develop various life skills. For this study, demographic, event satisfaction, and application of knowledge data were collected from 2,154 past Congress participants. Findings revealed that the majority of participants were satisfied or very satisfied with their Congress experience, and 63% of the respondents had used information gained from the event. Continued efforts to ensure future delegations represent the diversity of 4-H are encouraged, along with continued evaluation of event satisfaction levels and the extent to which life skills are developed and retained.

Keywords: 4-H, National 4-H Congress, life skills, Social Learning Theory, 4-H alumni

Introduction

As a youth development and mentoring organization, 4-H "provides kids with community, mentors, and learning opportunities to develop the skills they need to create positive change in their lives and communities" (National 4-H Council, 2021, para. 1). Currently serving 6 million young people in both rural and urban areas, 4-H is available in each state and is delivered through the national land-grant university system (National 4-H Council, 2021). Although the implementation of the organization's programmatic efforts is unique to each state, the overall goals of 4-H are accomplished through hands-on projects in various subject areas, leadership development opportunities, partnerships with positive adult role models, along with social and recreational events. The organization has been in existence since 1902 and seeks to carry out its mission through four main values: the head, heart, hands, and health of its members.

In 1999, Van Horn et al. offered a suggestion regarding the preservation of a strong 4-H organization: "If the 4-H program wants to be a force in the future, it needs to be progressive and adaptive to new trends and ideas, reaching youth from all cultures, races, ethnic groups, and income levels" (para. 19). One way for the organization to remain relevant is to evaluate if and how well large-scale national events, such as National 4-H Congress (Congress), reflect the needs of today's youth. Congress would have celebrated a 100-year milestone in November 2020 were it not canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Congress promotes leadership, civic engagement, global mindedness, and inclusion by offering high-school-aged 4-Hers an

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opportunity to participate in assemblies and networking activities over a five-day period (National 4-H Congress, 2020b).

Historically, Congress was created to recognize 4-H'ers who won state and national competitive events. While award recognition is still a focus, the event has evolved to include more educational aspects for youth attendees (National 4-H Congress, 2019). Collaboratively planned by youth and adults representing different states (National 4-H Congress, 2020a), Congress now includes activities involving motivational speakers, leadership workshops, a community service project, recreational events, and educational tours of notable locations in the host city (National 4-H Congress, 2019). Congress has evolved with the changing needs of participants over the years to remain relevant and valuable (National 4-H Congress, 2019).

Offering a sense of belonging, connecting youth with caring adults, and providing positive ways to build mastery, Congress is an example of how 4-H provides a safe, welcoming environment for youth to learn life skills and develop and build upon assets for the future (Lerner et al., 2005). Furthermore, the focus on asset creation and development provides a level of proactive mitigation related to potential gaps associated with a young person's readiness for adult responsibilities associated with at-risk behavior. Such behavior may be a result of training deficits in social, communication, and resilience skills fostered by positive youth development activities and mentors (Tuttle et al., 2006). It is important to note that at-risk behavior is linked to inequity of resources often experienced by marginalized youth and communities. Underrepresented populations who lack access to positive youth development initiatives, such as Congress, face complex barriers to opportunities that could serve as enhancing interventions to adult development (Sanders et al., 2015).

As stated on the main homepage of the 4-H website in March 2021, "Talent is everywhere. Opportunity is not" (4-H, 2021). If young people have access to youth organizations, such as 4-H, there is evidence to indicate those youth develop life skills and are more prepared for adulthood (Lerner et al., 2005). Radhakrishna and Sinasky (2005) found that 4-H experiences, such as challenging projects and leadership responsibilities, positively influence alumni later in life. Relatedly, Maass et al. (2006) found that "The top five life skills most influenced by participation in 4-H were public speaking, community service volunteering, self-discipline, self-responsibility, and teamwork" (para. 13). Extension educators are frequently encouraged to continue finding creative ways to develop leadership and life skills (Radhakrishna & Sinasky, 2005) in 4-H youth, who often do not realize they are developing such skills because of their fun experiences (Arnold, 2018). Congress is an avenue for 4-H staff to expand upon such creative, fun, and influential strategies targeted to help youth succeed.

Congress serves as a reoccurring event where youth develop character and necessary life skills. Therefore, an evaluation of its attendees and its impact, as perceived by those attendees, can prove to be enlightening and important. The need for such an evaluation is evidenced in similar,

state-level literature. For example, a previous study from North Carolina 4-H found that "A large majority [of North Carolina 4-H Congress attendees] also became more involved in cultural activities, 4-H activities, 4-H recognition applications, and 4-H presentations or projects and recruited others to attend the next 4-H Congress" (Silliman, 2008). Additionally, Garst et al. (2006) conducted a study on Virginia's State 4-H Congress and found that "[I]t is important to recognize the related life skill development that these programs and events foster" for 4-H youth development (para. 19).

This study complements and expounds upon past explorations of youth development programming. Its purpose is to provide insights for Extension professionals about who typically attends events like Congress, and in a broad sense, if the experience has any lasting influence. Preliminary information such as this may impact decisions about 4-H programming at the local, state, and national levels in a way that more youth are offered opportunities to develop in various areas highlighted at events like Congress.

Conceptual Framework

The experience of attending an event like Congress aligns with Bandura's (1977) social learning theory (SLT), which "represents the reciprocal interaction between an individual, the environment, and the individual's subsequent behavior" (Lamm et al., 2016, p. 123). Specifically, the model theorizes an individual is influenced by their environment and their subsequent behavior through observation and reinforcement or weakening. However, the individual also contributes and influences the environment through their subsequent observations and modified behaviors (Bandura, 1977). From an evaluation perspective, SLT has been established in the literature as a conceptual framework for evaluating programs using appropriate concepts (see Lamm et al., 2016), such as the Kirkpatrick four-level model (Kirkpatrick, 1994). For example, Lamm et al. (2016) evaluated adult agricultural leadership development programs in the United States, aligning the *individual*, *environment*, and *behavior* factors of SLT to operationalized measures. Specifically, *individual* characteristics were captured based on participant demographics (Guy, 2013). A proxy for *environment* was program satisfaction, or Kirkpatrick Level One (1994), as program satisfaction has been linked to programmatic outcomes in previous research (Galindo-Gonzalez & Israel, 2010). Lastly, *behavior* was operationalized as taking on leadership roles or Kirkpatrick Level Three (1994). The current research replicated the conceptual framework and approach previously established within the literature.

Methods

We implemented a descriptive study design to collect data using the Qualtrics online survey platform. The population of interest was individuals who attended Congress as youth representatives. Congress is overseen by the National 4-H Council and a committee of 4-H and Extension administrators. The program itself is managed by a program manager who is

responsible for the specific logistics of the program. A database containing 12,282 names and email addresses of former Congress participants dating back to 2003 was provided by the Congress program manager. A survey invitation was sent to all individuals within the database. If survey invitations were returned through the online distribution tool Qualtrics, they were manually reviewed for structural integrity, such as proper formatting. Email addresses that had structural issues were updated. For example, if a space was included in the address, it was removed and retried. After a review of returned emails, there were 4,424 email addresses that were no longer accurate, resulting in 7,858 potential respondents. Overall, there were 2,154 completed responses for a 27% response rate. However, data were also screened for accuracy, specifically, Congress participation is limited to individuals who are considered senior 4-Hers between 14 and 18 years old. Based on the years under analysis (2003 through 2016), only individuals that self-reported an age from 14 to 35 (2003 -18 = 1985; 2019 – 1985 = 34 years old plus one year for birthday timing) were included in the analysis. Therefore, a total of 2,122 responses were analyzed, still resulting in a 27% response rate. Fifty-two states and territories were represented, with most respondents currently residing in Wisconsin (n = 121), Georgia (n = 109), Texas (n = 93), Tennessee (n = 86), and Kansas (n = 86). Data were collected as part of an evaluation of the National 4-H Congress.

Survey questions were developed to quantify participant experiences across the individual, environment, and behavior SLT factors (Lamm et al., 2016). Individual data consisted of self-reported demographic characteristics (e.g., Lamm et al., 2016, 2020). Environment was measured by a three-item index, using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), and was on the basis of self-reported levels of satisfaction with Congress (Kirkpatrick, 1994). An example of a measurement item for this section is, “I was satisfied with my National 4-H Congress experience.” A Cronbach’s Alpha of .81 was observed for the satisfaction index, indicating an acceptable level of internal consistency for analysis. Behavior was operationalized in a single item as respondents’ application of information learned at Congress after the event (Kirkpatrick, 1994). Specifically, respondents were asked to “Please indicate whether you used what was presented at National 4-H Congress.” As context, respondents were allowed to answer, or not answer, any item within the instrument. Therefore, any discrepancies between the total number of respondents and total values within the results are attributable to respondent non-response.

We collected data using the Tailored Design Method (Dillman et al., 2008). In alignment with this method, in July 2019, a prenotice was sent to the database of potential respondents by the Congress committee chair. Within two days, an individualized invitation was sent to all potential respondents. In addition, six reminder messages were sent to nonrespondents over the course of four weeks. The survey was closed in August 2019. Data were analyzed using the SPSS Version 25 statistical software tool (IBM SPSS, 2017).

Results

Individual: Demographics

Individuals indicated the year they began participating in 4-H and the year they stopped participating in 4-H. Starting years ranged from 1989 to 2017, and stopping years ranged from 2003 to 2018. Total years in 4-H was calculated by subtracting the year started from the year stopped. There was a calculated range of zero to 15 years, with the most frequent response being 10 years (M = 10.00, SD = 2.67).

We also asked respondents to self-report their demographic information, shown in Table 1. Respondents were between 15 and 35 years of age, with 19 (n = 205) being the most frequent age recorded (M = 22.47, SD = 4.31). Respondents were also asked to self-report their gender, race/ethnicity, educational attainment, and current employment status.

Table 1. Respondent Demographics

Item	*n*	*%*
Gender		
Female	1,282	71.4
Male	489	27.2
Prefer not to answer	24	1.3
Race		
American Indian or Alaska Native	17	1.0
Asian	50	2.8
Black or African American	43	2.4
Other	41	2.3
White	1,631	91.5
Ethnicity		
Hispanic/Latino(a)/Chicano(a)*	66	3.7
Not Hispanic/Latino(a)/Chicano(a)*	1,703	96.3
Educational Attainment		
Less than 12th grade (did not graduate high school)	152	8.5
High school graduates (includes GED)	293	16.4
Some college, no degree	464	25.9
2-college degree (Associates, Technical, etc.)	158	8.8
4-year college degree (Bachelor's, etc.)	538	30.1
Master's degree (MS, MBA, etc.)	137	7.7
Doctorate (PhD, EdD, etc.)	14	0.8
Professional degree (JD, MD, DDS, DVM, etc.)	33	1.8
Current Employment Status		
Enrolled as a full-time student	741	41.7
Working part-time	248	13.9
Working full-time	681	38.3
Not working for income	45	2.5
Retired	1	0.1
None of the above	62	3.5

Note. *(a) Denotes female name of the demographic group

Environment: Satisfaction

Respondents were also asked to indicate their level of satisfaction with their Congress experience. Overall, respondents indicated a high level of satisfaction with their 4-H Congress experience (M = 4.65, SD = .57).

Behavior: Application

We also asked respondents to indicate whether they used the information they learned at Congress. A majority, 62.8% (n = 1,204), indicated that they definitely used the information they learned (Table 2).

Table 2. National 4-H Congress Information Use (n = 1,916)

Item	*n*	*%*
Yes, I definitely used the information	1,204	62.8
I can't remember whether I used the information or not	669	34.9
No, I definitely did not use the information	43	2.2

Discussion

The results of the study provide a foundational overview of Congress participants. At the individual level, demographically, respondents represented multiple races and ethnicities, with White respondents representing the largest proportion of respondents (91.2%). This result is consistent with the 2005-2014 longitudinal national 4-H enrollment data, where the largest group represented in the program was self-identified as White (77%) (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2016). Additionally, the majority of respondents to the present study self-identified as female (72%). While respondent demographics give Extension professionals some insights into who typically attends Congress, Lamm et al. (2020) offer a fruitful way to make meaning of demographic data. They suggest "to not only focus on what groups may have the most respondents, but also what groups have significant representation, as well as what groups have the smallest number of representatives" (p. 138). An associated recommendation is to ensure Congress is an environment where youth learn life skills and collaborate with peers from different backgrounds and perspectives and for delegations to consider the local, state, and national 4-H community and representation. An additional recommendation is to consider other factors that may influence participation, such as access or resources (Addy et al., 2013). Using demographic data thoughtfully and appropriately can also inform recruitment, programmatic, and 4-H alumni engagement strategies for large-scale events like Congress (Lamm et al., 2020). Ultimately, as stated by McKee and Bruce (2019), "Creating an environment of inclusion within our programs removes barriers for potential participants so that we can fulfill the land-grant mission" (para. 13).

The results of the study indicate the majority of respondents (96.5%) are working in some capacity or are full-time students. The level of workforce preparation, or engagement, indicates

an opportunity for future investigation. For example, a recent study amongst 4-H alumni nationally found that 4-H alumni are more fulfilled by their jobs and are more financially secure than non-4-H alumni (National 4-H Council, 2020). Additionally, 53% of 4-H alumni feel that 4-H impacted their career choices (National 4-H Council, 2020). A recommendation would be to investigate whether specific content learned at an event such as Congress impacts career choices.

As a proxy for the learning environment, Kirkpatrick Level One (1994) satisfaction data were captured. The results indicate that the majority of participants were very satisfied with their Congress experience. Despite the positive outcome observed in the study, an associated limitation must also be acknowledged; specifically, satisfaction is only one potential measure of the environment. For the purposes of the present study, the factor was operationalized in this manner; however, a recommendation would be for future research to consider additional measures and metrics associated with the environment. Accordingly, the results associated with the study should only be regarded as a benchmark and not generalizable beyond the current study.

Lastly, as a measure of behavior, 62.8% of respondents indicated that they "definitely used the information" learned at Congress. Based on this preliminary data, it is recommended that future research further examines what type of information was learned, remembered, and applied. A limitation of the current study is the use of a single item to operationalize behavior. A recommendation would be to conduct future research with more robust and comprehensive measures of behavior. Although 62.8% is over half of respondents, the results indicate there is opportunity for improvement. For example, participants may benefit more from workshops and learning activities when they are encouraged to consider how they can apply the information after they leave Congress. A recommendation is to create an action-oriented sense of urgency for attendees to use their newly gained knowledge. Additionally, youth could be tasked with sharing their Congress experiences back in their state or community, providing them another opportunity to reflect and apply material outside Congress.

Conclusion

The present study provides a benchmark within the literature specific to Congress. Data described alumni respondents demographically (*individual*), their satisfaction with the program (*environment*), and application of their experience (*behavior*). Using SLT as a conceptual framework for the study provides a set of criteria within which to consider retrospective experiences, including individual characteristics, environmental conditions, and behavioral outcomes. Many study respondents were white, female, and full-time students or full-time workers. Many also had college experience, were very satisfied with their Congress experience, and self-reported that they used the information gained from Congress. Although the data are intended to describe Congress participant demographics, satisfaction levels, and information use, it is important to note that the results of the study are not intended to be comprehensive. A

limitation with the study is the response rate; therefore, a recommendation is to consider the results of the study as a baseline for consideration but should not be interpreted as a census of all possible participant experiences. Overall, the more Congress can empower participants to engage in the experience and apply what they learn, the larger impact the program can have on individuals, their local clubs, and more generally, the communities in which they live.

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