

**Title:** 4-H State Officers Develop Leadership and Life Skills Through Youth-Adult Partnerships

**Author:** Jason Estep and Mandy Marable

**Summary:** Each year, many 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade 4-H'ers from around the state qualify as candidates and then campaign for a position on the Georgia 4-H State Board of Directors. The campaigning and elections take place at 4-H State Council during the summer. There, voting delegates select nine individuals to serve a one-year term as a state officer on the Board of Directors. Following State Council, the newly-elected state officers attend an intensive four-day leadership training taught by state and county 4-H staff, 4-H volunteers, and faculty and staff from the University of Georgia to prepare them for a year of presiding at assemblies, officiating events, developing skits and themes, and representing Georgia 4-H in a variety of settings.

**Situation:** The mission of Georgia 4-H is to assist youth in acquiring knowledge, developing life skills, and forming attitudes that will enable them to become self-directing, productive and contributing members of society. This mission is largely accomplished by providing various leadership opportunities for our state's youth in partnership with caring adults trained in positive youth development. The 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development found that youth involved in 4-H are 3.4 times more likely to contribute to their communities than youth who do not participate in 4-H. Leadership studies indicate that youth who participate in leadership roles are highly motivated and more developmentally adjusted than their peers, and, in general, are more likely to feel an improved sense of support from their local communities (Anderson, Sabatelli, and Trachtenberg, 2006). Furthermore, if adolescents are to develop the skills necessary for adulthood, they must learn basic skills for everyday life (Carnegie Council for Adolescent Development, 1995). Through training, members of the Georgia 4-H State Board of Directors gain skills in public speaking, etiquette, social interaction, decision making, teamwork, and other leadership and life skills that build self-esteem.

**Response:** Georgia 4-H State Officers go through an intensive four day training in which they are taught how to present and speak at a podium, theme planning, etiquette, donor relations, leadership and personality styles, teamwork, and more. The training is designed and implemented by members of the state 4-H faculty and involves numerous guest presenters. Newly-elected officers are also assigned prior Board members to serve as mentors and are given the chance to meet together during the training. Additional training and planning sessions are held throughout the year via in-person and online meetings. State 4-H faculty serve as advisers to the Board -- setting high expectations, creating a safe environment, and providing constructive feedback on an ongoing basis. Board members are empowered to exercise independence and shine in a variety of settings and before diverse audiences as they represent the more than 177,000 4-H youth in Georgia.

**Results/Impacts:** Dr. Kay Kelsey, in “The Sharpening Stone: A Phenomenological Study of Youth Leadership Experiences as a 4-H State Board of Director” (submitted for publication), used a phenomenological research design to understand and describe the essence of the state officers’ lived experience. From this research, Dr. Kelsey concluded that the Georgia 4-H State Board of Directors Program, “in addition to an average of 7.68 years as a 4-H member, served to improve and sharpen members’ leadership and life skills....” Also, “members made statistically significant positive changes for 100% of the questions for *communication*; 100% for *decision making*; 100% for *understanding self*; 100% for *working with groups*; 50% for *management*; 80% for *learning*; and 25% for *getting along with others*.” These results were true, regardless of the specific position an individual held on the Board.

Importantly, members “defined leadership as ‘serving others’ and engaged in community service. 4-H afforded members a plethora of opportunities to gain confidence, express their authentic selves, and transition into adulthood with an increased sense of self-awareness, increased responsibility, and autonomy. They translated their service to others in a variety of community service projects. This finding is similar to Boyd, Herring, and Briers (1992) and Fitzpatrick et al. (2005) who reported that 4-H alumni spent seven years on average in 4-H programs and benefited from length of exposure to positive youth development activities.”

“Adult 4-H leaders were influential on members’ development by teaching just-in-time lessons on diversity, inclusion, kindness, finding one’s authentic voice, reciprocity, and being nurturing. Adult leaders treated members with respect and set high expectations for personal behavior and performance....” Through participation as a State Board of Director (SBD), “[m]embers were aware of their ability to grow and contribute meaningful leadership not only in the context of 4-H but also in their families, schools, and communities. Overall, the SBD experience helped members to sharpen their LLS by offering structured training, creating a supportive environment for risk taking, giving members autonomy, holding high expectations for performance, and providing feedback.”

Reference: Kelsey, K. (manuscript submitted for publication). The Sharpening Stone: A Phenomenological Study of Youth Leadership Experiences as a 4-H State Board of Director.



UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

EXTENSION

[georgia4h.org](http://georgia4h.org) | 1-800-ASK-UGA1

The University of Georgia 4-H program is the largest youth leadership organization in the state.

*An Equal Opportunity, Affirmative Action, Veteran, Disability Institution*