

Title: Georgia 4-H Pivots Youth Project Achievement During Global Pandemic

Author: Keri Hobbs

Situation: Businesses and organizations need hires to have employable soft skills, such as communication skills, public speaking skills, and other workforce preparation. With local school system partnerships and reach of over 200,000 youth annually, Georgia 4-H is well suited for the challenge with Project Achievement, a project-based program for 4th-12th graders. Youth select a topic, explore their interest in the selected field, and develop and share a presentation. However, barriers include the capacity to develop youth and evaluate their projects, youth recruitment, and ensuring access (particularly amid a pandemic). While six Cloverleaf Project Achievements had already taken place in the program year, in March of 2020, five Project Achievement area contests were canceled due to the global pandemic that would have served over 1,500 youth in grades 4th-6th. The threat to live programs continued in July of 2020 as sheltering-in-place guidelines continued, restricting the typical statewide gathering for Georgia 4-H State Congress, that typically included more than 250 high school competitors.

Response: Understanding the huge impact this program has on youth and their skill development, UGA Extension faculty and staff quickly acted! Three days following the start of the sheltering-in-place restrictions, a team of seven faculty and staff quickly developed a framework, hosted a faculty and staff training, and launched an online virtual Project Achievement contest for 4th - 6th grade students who had previously been registered to attend the face-to-face contest. As the pandemic continued over the summer, Georgia 4-H's premiere event, State 4-H Congress, was transitioned to a virtual format by utilizing a similar structure but tailoring the approach to the contest. In addition to the previous framework created, UGA Extension faculty and staff developed a process for youth to join in interviews with judges by utilizing video-conferencing technology where they discussed their portfolio work from the year. Portfolios were emailed to judges, as well as filmed videos of youth presentations. One-hundred and forty judges from 11 states were recruited, trained, and orientated virtually for service. Scoring of presentations, interviews, and portfolios were completed completely online and represent approximately 1,000 hours of volunteer service.

Results/Impacts: Georgia 4-H creatively designed and piloted a process to enable youth to engage (and still compete) in Project Achievement, even amid a global pandemic! This new development created and launched the framework for Georgia 4-H's virtual ability for competitions. This year, 427 youth in 4th-6th grades participated in the virtual format from 47 counties in all regions of Georgia. Youth virtually joined the competition from farms (5.14%), rural communities (46.02%), towns (23.83%), suburbs (10.28%), and cities (3.37%). Youth were instructed by local county staff and self-reported (on a 4-point Likert scale) that they:

- Gained confidence in speaking in front of people M=3.32 (SD=.78)
- Improved ability to prepare presentations M=3.54 (SD=.53)
- Acquired knowledge about topic M=3.63 (SD=.55)
- Improved presentation skills M=3.54 (SD=.53)

Keisha Jones, the Dodge County 4-H Agent who led youth to compete virtually noted, "Virtual Project Achievement did not disappoint. Our parents and students were more than eager to showcase their hard work and they thank Georgia 4-H for the creativity and hard work it took to make this happen for them."

During the state Project Achievement competition, the virtual format enabled 243 youth participants from 98 Georgia counties to still compete in their projects and sharpen their skills. Youth virtually joined the competition from farms (9.05%), rural communities (40.53%), towns (27.57%), suburbs (9.05%), and cities (4.53%). They collectively submitted 62 hours of recorded presentations for judging and engaged in virtual interviews. With the help of 52 4-H youth development professionals, 26 virtual interview rooms were hosted simultaneously for the youth competition.

One volunteer portfolio and interview judge noted, “Thank you for the opportunity to participate in the 4-H State Project Achievement competition. Reading through each participant’s portfolio was inspiring and really highlighted the positive impact of the 4-H program to develop the leaders of tomorrow.”

Another judge noted, “The judging was efficient, organized, and very professional. Great job setting it up in the midst of all of that is going on!”

April Edwards, Jackson County 4-H Agent stated, “Thank you for giving the students this opportunity! Our 4-Hers across the state greatly appreciate the effort and hard work it has taken to turn State Congress into a virtual format. We applaud the state office and want to share our gratitude!”



UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

EXTENSION

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