

# Expanding 4-H Alumni Life Perspectives: An Experiential and Programmatic Evaluation

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## Abstract

*Involvement with the 4-H program during youth has been empirically shown to have positive effects on participants and to influence their life perspectives and career development. The activities offered within 4-H allow individuals to build relationships with peers and mentors, develop life and leadership skills, and create a positive self-concept. The focus of this study was to identify key touchstones which influenced 4-H alumni life perspectives and inform program development to ensure individuals are exposed to these activities during their 4-H involvement. Although numerous studies have examined the positive outcomes of 4-H programming, limited research exists identifying the context in which these influential experiences occur. This study employed a modified Delphi approach, using an expert panel (n = 31) to identify and generate consensus regarding 4-H experiences, events, and programs deemed influential in expanding alumni life perspectives. Thirty-six items were retained following the Delphi process. Two items received unanimous consensus: 1) interaction with diverse groups, and 2) hearing dynamic speakers and listening to accomplishments they have achieved because of involvement in 4-H. Retained items were analyzed for overarching themes using the constant comparative method (CCM). Five themes emerged following the CCM analysis: 1) professional skills and leadership development, 2) networking and mentorship opportunities, 3) 4-H events, programs, and camps, 4) 4-H projects and educational opportunities, and 5) internal influences. These themes may be combined with Robert's (2006) model of experiential learning to identify the appropriate setting, duration, level, and intended outcomes of 4-H programming.*

**Keywords:** 4-H; alumni life perspectives; experiential learning; leadership and life skills development

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## Introduction

4-H is the United States' largest youth development organization and was founded on the principles of leadership, community engagement, and innovation (4-H, n.d.). Specifically within Georgia, the 4-H program has a mission 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" (para. 2) through hands-on learning activities and service-learning opportunities (Georgia 4-H, n.d.). Beginning as a corn club for boys in 1904, the Georgia 4-H program has grown to

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over 242,000 active members (Georgia 4-H, 2019), who engage with a variety of issues including agricultural and environmental concerns, food and nutrition, agriculture awareness, energy conservation, health, and leadership (Georgia 4-H, n.d.). Through diverse programming (e.g., out-of-school activities, in-school enrichment opportunities, clubs, and camps), the Georgia 4-H program enables youth to become forward-thinking leaders skilled to address and raise awareness about pressing issues in today's environmental, social, and agricultural climate (Georgia 4-H, n.d.; 4-H, n.d.).

Indicators of positive development as a result of involvement with extracurricular activities have been well-documented within the literature (Knifsend & Graham, 2012; Kelsey & Fuhrman, 2020; Kelsey, 2020). These activities allow adolescents to build the leadership and cognitive skills necessary to be successful in their future careers and to explore their personal identity (Kelsey, 2020). 4-H alumni reported that their involvement had a positive influence on their personal and community development (Anderson et al., 2010; Merten et al., 2014). Moreover, 4-H participation allowed individuals to build relationships (SeEVERS et al., 2011; Bird & Subramaniam, 2018), develop leadership and life skills (Moran et al., 2019; Worker et al., 2019; Cletzer & Kaufman, 2020; Kelsey & Fuhrman, 2020) and develop a positive self-concept (Leff et al., 2015; Bird & Subramaniam, 2018; Worker et al., 2019; Kelsey, 2020;).

The goals of this study align with two research priority areas addressed in the AAAE National Research Agenda 2016-2020 (Roberts et al., 2016): 1) research priority area four - meaningful and engaged learning in all environments, and 2) research priority area five - efficient and effective agricultural education programs. One of the questions this study seeks to answer concerns "the short, medium, and long-term outcomes and impacts of education programs in agriculture and natural resources" (Roberts et al., 2016, p. 43). Specifically, this study examined the long-term impacts of 4-H involvement by identifying key experiences, events, and activities that influenced alumni life perspectives. It is important to note that this study is not measuring the effects or outcomes of these long-term impacts; rather, this study seeks to identify the experiences, events, and activities within 4-H that facilitate long-term impacts in alumni.

It is well-documented that youth involvement in 4-H can have a positive effect on individuals and influence their life perspectives and career development (Kavanaugh & Allen, 2020; Kelsey & Fuhrman, 2020; Kelsey, 2020). However, a key focus is determining the contexts in which these effects and influences occur. Identifying these key touchstones can inform effective programming and ensure that individuals are exposed to these crucial opportunities during 4-H involvement. While many studies have examined the impacts of a singular 4-H event on youth development outcomes (see Bird & Subramaniam, 2018; Allen & Lohman, 2016; Davis et al., 2016; Harris et al., 2016; Leff et al., 2015; Anderson et al., 2015), limited research exists where 4-H alumni identify key programs that had long-term impacts on their life perspectives. We fill this gap in the literature by using an expert panel to identify 4-H programming that had a lasting influence on participants.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Numerous conceptualizations of experiential learning exist in the literature (see Dewey, 1910; Rogers, 1969; Joplin, 1981; Kolb, 1984; Dale, 1946). However, two main characterizations of experiential learning have emerged: the first which characterizes experiential learning as a concept (e.g., Dewey, 1938; Joplin, 1981; Kolb, 1984) and the second which emphasizes the context in which experiential learning takes place (e.g., Dale, 1946; Joplin, 1981; Keeton, 1976). This study operates under Roberts' (2006) conceptualization, which defines experiential learning as a cyclical process motivated by theory. Initially, experiential learning is precipitated by the learner's focus on a particular phenomenon or topic of interest, which is followed by interaction with the phenomenon or topic of interest. Individuals then reflect on the interaction, develop generalizations about the interaction, and test these generalizations. Roberts' (2006) model of experiential learning separates the context in which experiential learning occurs into four dimensions: setting, duration, intended outcome, and level.

*Setting:* Etling (1993) theorized that the educational settings in which experiential learning can take place exist on a continuum from formal learning environments to non-formal environments to informal environments. Formal educational settings are defined as structured learning environments over which the teacher or instructor was able to exert a high level of control, such as a classroom or laboratory. Some examples of experiential learning activities that could occur within formal environments include hands-on activities, projects, and demonstrations. Non-formal educational settings are characterized as environments which were less structured and usually outside of a classroom or school setting. Even though these settings were considered non-formal, the experiential learning activities carried out within these settings still possessed defined goals and a high level of planning. Supervised internships, service-learning projects and outdoor/adventure programs would all be classified as non-formal experiential learning activities. Informal experiential learning settings exist on the opposing end of Etling's (1993) spectrum and define activities which lack structure, planning, and organization. These activities are characterized more by incidental learning or daily experiences and included autonomous, on-the-job learning.

*Duration:* Roberts' (2006) model of experiential learning conceptualized the duration of experiential learning as a spectrum from seconds to years. This spectrum builds on the conceptualization proposed by Joplin (1981) who asserted that experiential learning durations could be classified according to a mini-maxi continuum. At the mini level, experiential learning activities occurred as a flash of insight, sometimes no more than a few seconds, while at the maxi level, experiential learning occurred on a far larger and more structured level (e.g., a whole class with curricula developed specifically to facilitate experiential learning). The mini-maxi continuum can be superimposed with Roberts' (2006) spectrum, indicating mini experiential learning opportunities may exist as no more than a few seconds in time, while maxi experiential learning opportunities may take up to years to complete.

*Intended Outcome:* Steinaker and Bell (1979) created a taxonomical classification for the various intended outcomes of experiential learning. The five components of this taxonomy were exposure, participation, identification, internalization, and dissemination. Each of these components influenced how the individual would approach the experiential learning activity as well as classifying the individual's intended goals for the activity. An intended outcome of exposure indicated that the goal of the activity was for participants to develop an awareness of the chosen topic of phenomenon. The intended goal of participation was for participants to physically interact with the subject or phenomenon of interest via the experiential learning opportunity. Identification indicated that the experiential learning activity was intended to facilitate learner involvement with the phenomenon or object of study. For internalization, the intended goal was to exert a marked effect on the individuals in the hopes that this experience would precipitate a lifestyle change. Finally, dissemination indicated that the purpose was for participants to share what they learned with their social network.

*Level:* Dale's (1946) Cone of Experience model served as the foundation for categorizing various levels within experiential learning opportunities. This model is separated into three broad themes including doing, observing, and symbolizing. These themes moved on a continuum from more concrete (e.g., doing) to more abstract (e.g., symbolizing). Doing formed the base of the cone and is characterized by more concrete experiences where learners tangibly participated in the activity. Examples include direct, purposeful experiences (e.g., real-life events), contrived experiences (e.g., interactive models), and dramatic participations (e.g., role-playing). The middle of the cone consists of activities that focused on observing a topic or phenomenon of interest. When individuals observed the object of interest, they did not directly interact with the object or phenomenon but learned through indirect methods. Activities in this category include watching demonstrations, taking field trips, visiting museum exhibits, and studying movies, videos, audio recordings, or pictures. The top of the cone represents abstract experiences with which participants could not really observe or tangibly interact.

This type of experiential learning opportunity is typically represented by symbols that are communicated visually and verbally.

### **4-H Life Experiences Literature Review**

4-H youth development programming heavily relies upon experiential learning opportunities (Woffinden & Packham, 2011; Taylor et al., 2019). The following literature review summarizes a variety of 4-H experiential learning opportunities and details how these experiences contribute to positive youth development outcomes.

One of the common themes that emerged from the literature review was 4-H involvement during adolescence facilitated the development of life skills (Davis et al., 2016; Allen & Lohman, 2016; Harris et al., 2016). Kelsey and Fuhman (2020) employed a mixed methods study to determine the impact of a 4-H youth leadership program on participants' life leadership skills. Long-term engagement in 4-H positively increased life leadership skill development by reinforcing the material learned in 4-H and facilitating positive role-modeling among peers (Kelsey & Fuhman, 2020). Youth participants indicated their understanding of self, oral communication, teamwork, problem solving, and decision-making skills improved because of their participation in a 4-H state-level leadership position (Kelsey & Fuhman, 2020). Furthermore, Kelsey (2020) found that youth participants were able to gain leadership skills in serving others, self-confidence, open-mindedness, personal agency, and self-awareness through 4-H involvement. The state-level leadership program that participants were involved in enabled them to expand their life leadership skills by creating a supportive environment for risk-taking, holding high standards of performance, giving participants autonomy, and providing meaningful feedback (Kelsey, 2020).

A second theme was 4-H participation precipitated the development of leadership skills (Allen & Lohman, 2016; Epley et al., 2017). Members of a state 4-H leadership board reported increased competencies in getting along with and respecting others because of their 4-H participation (Moran et al., 2019). Worker et al. (2019) examined a Teenagers-as-Teachers program sponsored by the California 4-H and found that teenage participants developed leadership skills through teaching and working with younger children. Specifically, teenage participants moved outside of comfort goals, embraced their responsibility as a positive role model, enhanced public speaking skills, and learned how to plan and prepare lessons (Worker et al., 2019). Similarly, 4-H camp has been shown to be influential in leadership development among youth workers and campers. Bird and Subramaniam (2018) found that teenage workers at a 4-H camp increased their sense of responsibility, commitment to follow through with obligations, and self-confidence because of their camp experience. The findings of Leff et al. (2015) echo Bird and Subramaniam's (2018) conclusion that 4-H camps facilitate transformative learning. Participants agreed that leading camp traditions, being challenged, and having opportunities to positively impact children led to personal transformation during their summer as 4-H youth camp counselors (Leff et al., 2015).

In addition to life and leadership skills development, the literature review indicated that 4-H participation facilitated the development of meaningful relationships with peers and adults. A comprehensive study examining the impact of 4-H in several Western states revealed that 4-H members reported having closer relationships with adults and parents than youth who were not 4-H members (Seevers et al., 2011). Additionally, Stechschulte & Scheer (2017) piloted the use of Choose and Tell cards in 4-H programming and found that they created opportunities to form relationships with peers and to enhance positive relationships with adult volunteers. Reflecting on their experience working at a 4-H summer camp, teenage participants indicated that positive and mutual relationships with adult staff members were an influential factor contributing to their growth at camp (Bird & Subramaniam, 2018). Moreover, Wahle et al. (2016) quantitatively examined the extent to which youth experienced the 4-H essential elements during 4-H camps. The researchers found that caring adult camp leaders

were an influential contributor to campers' experience because campers deemed them as trustworthy and were able to go to these adults for assistance (Wahle et al., 2016).

As indicated by the literature review, there is a multitude of positive youth development outcomes that result from 4-H involvement. While the relationship between 4-H participation and positive youth development has been widely examined, there is a dearth of studies examining the specific contexts and events which facilitate this development. The current study addresses this gap in the literature by identifying experiences and programming within 4-H that have long term impacts on alumni.

### **Purpose and Research Objectives**

The purpose of this study was to determine the primary experiences, events, and activities that influenced 4-H alumni life perspectives. This purpose was accomplished by the following research objectives:

1. Create a comprehensive list of 4-H experiences, events, and projects that influence alumni life perspectives.
2. Reach a consensus on specific 4-H experiences, events, and projects that influence alumni life perspectives.

### **Methods**

To address research objectives one and two, we employed a modified Delphi approach. The data were collected as part of a larger research project intended to analyze the 4-H program more broadly. Data were collected across numerous 4-H related considerations; however, the focus of the current study centers on determining experiences in the 4-H program that had the most impact on expanding alumni life perspectives. Disclosure of the data collection context and focus for the present study are presented based on recommendations within the literature (Kirkman & Chen, 2011; Zhang et al., 2013).

As indicated previously, a modified Delphi method was employed to determine an expert panel's consensus list of 4-H experiences that were most influential in expanding alumni life perspectives. Developed by the Rand Corporation in the 1950s (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963), the Delphi method is widely used as a means for consensus-building among experts in a certain topic (Hsu & Sandford, 2007). The Delphi method has been applied to program planning and needs assessment (Hsu & Sandford, 2007) and has been used to reach consensus on critical issues in 4-H (see Young et al., 2019; Branscum et al., 2020). Theoretically, continual iterations can be employed until consensus is achieved (Hsu & Sandford, 2007); however, we modified this approach by only applying three iterations of the Delphi method, which are described in detail below. Hsu and Sandford (2007) state that Delphi participants should be highly trained and competent within the content area related to the target issue; well-known and respected members of the target group are recommended and are typically selected from a pool of positional leaders (Kaplan, 1971; Ludwig, 1974).

For our study, members of the expert panel were identified and selected based on their involvement with the Georgia 4-H Foundation advisory board. These board members were selected due to 4-H experience in both leadership positions and member participation. The panel was composed of 31 members, with 25 providing demographic and 4-H experience data. Among panelists, 60% ( $n = 15$ ) were male and 40% ( $n = 10$ ) were female. Expert panelists had an average age of 50 years, with a range from 18 to 70 years of age. Eighty percent ( $n = 20$ ) of the panelists were involved with a 4-H program throughout their childhood and adolescent years (not necessarily within the state of Georgia). Years of involvement with Georgia 4-H ranged from two to 60 years. Although five members of the advisory

board were not involved with 4-H as a youth member, their insights are included because of their leadership position in Georgia 4-H.

Data were collected from October 2018 to January 2019. All three rounds of the Delphi process were delivered online via the Qualtrics survey tool (Garson, 2014) and were administered according to the Tailored Design Method (Dillman et al., 2008). Prior to the survey, a pre-notice email was sent to all panelists. An additional email with a link to the survey along with a requested response date was sent within one week of the initial pre-notice email. Two days after the email with the survey link was sent, a reminder email was sent to panelists who had not yet responded. Two additional reminder messages were sent, approximately one per week. One day before the survey closed, a final reminder email was sent to non-respondents.

Round one of the Delphi process asked panel members to provide up to five responses using a short phrase or word relating to the 4-H experiences that influenced life perspectives. A total of 25 out of 31 possible respondents completed round one of the Delphi, resulting in an 81% response rate. A total of 82 items were generated during round one. The items were reviewed for grammar and redundancy. Duplicate items were removed (Garson, 2014) and minor wording updates were made to improve readability; thus, 65 unique items were generated during round one. These 65 items were presented to expert panelists during round two. The second round of the Delphi was used to determine the level of importance expert panelists associated with the items identified in round one. Individual items were rated using a five-point Likert-type scale with the following possible responses: *1 – Not at all important, 2 – Somewhat important, 3 – Important, 4 – Very important, and 5 – Extremely important*. Descriptive statistics were calculated and a minimum mean score of 3.55 was established *a posteriori* (Garson, 2014).

Twenty six out of 31 possible respondents completed round two of the Delphi, resulting in an 84% response rate. Items with average levels of importance greater than 3.55 were retained. Forty-five of the 65 items presented to expert panelists in round two had a mean level of importance greater than 3.55 and were retained. There were two sets of repetitive items within this list of 45 items. The repetitive items were consolidated; thus, only 43 unique items were retained following round two. These 43 unique items were presented to expert panelists in round three. The final round of the Delphi was employed to determine expert panelists' level of consensus regarding the items retained after round two. Twenty-two of 31 possible respondents completed round three of the Delphi resulting in a 71% response rate.

According to recommendations by Keeney et al., 2011, response rates of greater than 70% per round within Delphi research are acceptable. Therefore, the obtained response rates for each round of the Delphi within this study were deemed acceptable. In round three, respondents were asked to indicate whether the item should be retained by selecting *Yes* or *No*. A threshold of 80% consensus for retaining items was established *a posteriori* and is acceptable according to standards within the Delphi literature (see Diamond et al., 2014; Hsu & Sandford, 2007). Thirty-six of the 43 items presented to panelists in round three obtained a level of consensus agreement greater than 80%. These 36 items were retained for further analysis.

Based on the items retained from the third round of the Delphi process, a thematic analysis of the items was completed. Specifically, the items were analyzed according to the constant comparative method or CCM (Glaser, 1965). The CCM provided an appropriate lens to complete a thematic analysis of the data. For the purposes of the current research, themes from the CCM analysis were informed by, but not constrained to, the themes identified within the 4-H life experiences literature review. Items were compared through an iterative process where items were initially assigned codes or labels (e.g., "Sense of purpose and belonging", "Testimonials", "Achievements"). The researcher used a manual coding process where color-coding, groupings, and data analysis were completed over a series of days. Following analysis, peer-checking and debriefing amongst the research team was completed to improve

data trustworthiness and rigor, additionally, final survey results were also shared and discussed with the expert panel as an agenda item during a board meeting (Guba, 1981).

## Results

The initial round of the Delphi resulted in 65 unique responses related to the most influential 4-H experiences that expanded alumni life perspectives. During round two, respondents rated the level of importance for each item identified in round one. Table 1 outlines the resulting mean level of importance and standard deviation for each item rated in round two.

**Table 1**

*Delphi Round One and Two Results: Level of Importance for Most Influential Experiences in the 4-H Program that Expanded Life Perspectives (n = 65)*

| Item   | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> |
|--|----------|-----------|
| Public speaking  | 4.58     | 0.96      |
| Rock Eagle [camp]  | 4.55     | 1.00      |
| Leadership programs  | 4.53     | 0.96      |
| Teamwork   | 4.50     | 0.51      |
| Leadership training  | 4.47     | 1.02      |
| Rock Eagle counselor   | 4.42     | 1.30      |
| Friendships  | 4.42     | 1.07      |
| State congress   | 4.35     | 0.99      |
| Camp program – general   | 4.35     | 1.27      |
| Summer camp  | 4.32     | 1.29      |
| State council  | 4.32     | 1.00      |
| Project achievement  | 4.32     | 1.06      |
| Leadership opportunities – general   | 4.30     | 1.08      |
| Interviewing skill development   | 4.26     | 1.15      |
| Counselor – general  | 4.21     | 1.36      |
| Camp counselor   | 4.21     | 1.32      |
| Sense of responsibility  | 4.17     | 0.99      |
| Resume development   | 4.16     | 1.07      |
| Project Achievement  | 4.16     | 1.01      |
| Hearing dynamic speakers and listening to accomplishments they have achieved because of involvement in 4-H | 4.16     | 1.12      |
| Travel across the state to 4-H events  | 4.16     | 1.17      |
| Critical thinking  | 4.11     | 0.94      |
| Belonging to something noble and good that accepted me for exactly who I was during my formative years     | 4.05     | 1.22      |
| Learning about Georgia   | 4.05     | 1.13      |
| Community service  | 4.00     | 1.25      |
| National 4-H Conference  | 4.00     | 1.52      |
| Cloverleaf project achievement   | 4.00     | 1.25      |
| Seeing other young people participating in 4-H and how it has impacted them                                | 4.00     | 1.05      |
| Judging – general  | 3.95     | 1.15      |
| Fall Forum   | 3.95     | 1.31      |
| County agent role model  | 3.95     | 1.13      |
| Local club activities  | 3.95     | 1.08      |
| Portfolio development  | 3.89     | 1.10      |

**Table 1**

*Delphi Round One and Two Results: Level of Importance for Most Influential Experiences in the 4-H Program that Expanded Life Perspectives (n = 65), Continued...*

|  |      |      |
|--|------|------|
| Opportunities to interact with adult leaders | 3.89 | 1.10 |
| Active alumni association                    | 3.89 | 1.20 |
| Travel nationally to 4-H events              | 3.85 | 1.50 |
| Interaction with diverse groups              | 3.84 | 1.12 |
| Geographical associations                    | 3.79 | 1.18 |
| Collegiate 4-H Program                       | 3.74 | 1.45 |
| Working with different ethnicities           | 3.74 | 1.33 |
| State Council                                | 3.74 | 1.41 |
| District officer position                    | 3.68 | 1.67 |
| Specialty camps                              | 3.68 | 1.67 |
| Project work – general                       | 3.68 | 1.06 |
| District Board                               | 3.63 | 1.67 |
| Sense of sportsmanship                       | 3.53 | 1.39 |
| Giving reasons while judging                 | 3.47 | 1.39 |
| Judging – Consumer                           | 3.32 | 1.60 |
| 4-H Patronage program in Washington DC       | 3.20 | 1.58 |
| Project work – Other                         | 3.11 | 1.10 |
| Weekend in Classic City                      | 3.00 | 1.68 |
| State officer position                       | 2.90 | 1.86 |
| Washington DC internship                     | 2.89 | 1.56 |
| Citizenship Washington Focus (CWF)           | 2.85 | 1.60 |
| Judging – Livestock                          | 2.65 | 1.53 |
| National 4-H Center volunteer Washington DC  | 2.60 | 1.50 |
| Project work – Foods                         | 2.50 | 1.25 |
| Clovers and Company                          | 2.47 | 1.43 |
| Project work – Electronics                   | 2.32 | 1.49 |
| International exchange trip                  | 2.30 | 1.34 |
| Judging – Horse                              | 2.21 | 1.40 |
| Project work – Livestock                     | 2.16 | 1.30 |
| National 4-H Center counselor                | 2.00 | 1.34 |
| Project work – Horse                         | 1.95 | 1.22 |
| World Dairy Expo                             | 1.78 | 1.26 |

The mean levels of importance ranged from 4.58 to 1.78. Respondents reported the highest mean level of importance associated with public speaking ( $M = 4.58$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ). Remaining experiences in the top seven items related to social skills, leadership development, and experiences at a Georgia 4-H camp. In the third round of the Delphi process, seven items obtained a consensus value below the 80% minimum threshold. Therefore, a total of 36 items were retained after round three. These items are presented in Table 2. Respondents unanimously agreed that two items were most influential in expanding alumni life perspectives. These items were: 1) interaction with diverse groups and 2) hearing dynamic speakers and listening to accomplishments they had achieved because of their involvement in 4-H. Nine items achieved consensus levels ranging from 84.6 – 86.7%, while 25 items achieved consensus levels ranging from 92.3 – 93.8%.



**Table 2**

*Delphi Round Three Results: Level of Consensus for Most Influential Experiences in the 4-H Program that Expanded Life Perspectives (n = 43)*

| Item   | Consensus (%) |
|--|---------------|
| Interaction with diverse groups  | 100.0         |
| Hearing dynamic speakers and listening to accomplishments they have achieved because of involvement in 4-H | 100.0         |
| Public speaking  | 93.8          |
| Opportunities to interact with adult leaders   | 93.8          |
| Friendships  | 93.8          |
| Travel across the state to 4-H events  | 93.3          |
| Summer camp  | 93.3          |
| State congress   | 93.3          |
| Seeing other young people participating in 4-H and how it has impacted them                                | 93.3          |
| Rock Eagle [camp]  | 93.3          |
| Project work – general   | 93.3          |
| Leadership training  | 93.3          |
| Interviewing skill development   | 93.3          |
| Counselor – general  | 93.3          |
| Camp program – general   | 93.3          |
| Belonging to something noble and good that accepted me for exactly who I was during my formative years     | 93.3          |
| Sense of responsibility  | 92.9          |
| Leadership programs  | 92.9          |
| Leadership opportunities – general   | 92.9          |
| Critical thinking  | 92.9          |
| Active alumni association  | 92.9          |
| Teamwork   | 92.3          |
| State council  | 92.3          |
| Project achievement  | 92.3          |
| Learning about Georgia   | 92.3          |
| Community service  | 92.3          |
| Cloverleaf project achievement   | 92.3          |
| Camp counselor   | 86.7          |
| Rock Eagle counselor   | 85.7          |
| Local club activities  | 85.7          |
| Judging – general  | 85.7          |
| County agent role model  | 85.7          |
| Working with different ethnicities   | 84.6          |
| Resume development   | 84.6          |
| Fall Forum   | 84.6          |
| Collegiate 4-H Program   | 84.6          |
| District Board   | 78.6          |
| Geographical associations  | 76.9          |
| Travel nationally to 4-H events  | 76.9          |
| Portfolio development  | 76.9          |
| District officer position  | 76.9          |
| National 4-H Conference  | 71.4          |
| Specialty camps  | 69.2          |

The resulting Delphi list was analyzed for conceptual themes using the CCM (Glaser, 1965). Similar codes were grouped into categories, resulting in five overarching themes that encompassed the resulting 36 items from the Delphi process. These themes and their individual items are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3***Constant Comparative Method Thematic Analysis Results (n = 36)*

| Categories   | Number of Issues Overall | Number of Issues with 90-100% Agreement |
|--|--------------------------|---|
| <i>Professional Skills and Leadership Development</i>  | 10                       | 7                                       |
| Interaction with diverse groups  |                          |   |
| Working with different ethnicities   |                          |   |
| Public speaking  |                          |   |
| Leadership training  |                          |   |
| Leadership responsibility  |                          |   |
| Leadership opportunities – general   |                          |   |
| Interviewing skill development   |                          |   |
| Critical thinking  |                          |   |
| Teamwork   |                          |   |
| Resume development   |                          |   |
| <i>Networking and Mentorship Opportunities</i>   | 5                        | 4                                       |
| Opportunities to interact with adult leaders   |                          |   |
| Active alumni association  |                          |   |
| County agent role model  |                          |   |
| Hearing dynamic speakers and listening to accomplishments they have achieved because of involvement in 4-H |                          |   |
| Seeing other young people participating in 4-H and how it has impacted them                                |                          |   |
| <i>4-H Events, Programs, and Camps</i>   | 12                       | 7                                       |
| Collegiate 4-H program   |                          |   |
| Travel across state to 4-H events  |                          |   |
| State congress   |                          |   |
| State council  |                          |   |
| Local club activities  |                          |   |
| Fall Forum   |                          |   |
| Summer camps   |                          |   |
| Rock Eagle [camp]  |                          |   |
| Counselor – general  |                          |   |
| Camp program – program   |                          |   |
| Camp counselor   |                          |   |
| Rock Eagle counselor   |                          |   |
| <i>4-H Projects and Educational Opportunities</i>  | 6                        | 5                                       |
| Project work – general   |                          |   |
| Judging – general  |                          |   |
| Learning about Georgia   |                          |   |
| Project achievement  |                          |   |
| Cloverleaf project achievement   |                          |   |
| Community service  |                          |   |

**Table 3***Constant Comparative Method Thematic Analysis Results (n = 36), Continued...*

|  |    |    |
|--|----|----|
| <i>Internal Influences</i>   | 3  | 3  |
| Friendships  |    |    |
| Belonging to something noble and good that accepted me for exactly who I was during my formative years |    |    |
| Sense of responsibility  |    |    |
| <i>Total</i>   | 36 | 26 |

### Conclusions, Recommendations, and Implications

Within this study, we sought to identify the experiences offered through Georgia 4-H participation that alumni considered to be the most influential on their life perspectives. Of the 65 initial experiences identified, 36 reached a level of expert consensus greater than 80%. Of the 36 experiences retained from the Delphi process, 75% ( $n = 27$ ) had an individual consensus rating between 90-100%. These results indicate there are a variety of experiences within the Georgia 4-H program that have an influential impact on alumni life perspectives.

Experiential learning can be considered from multiple perspectives, specifically: setting, duration, intended outcome, and level (Roberts, 2006). The results of the present study may provide a guide for educators to consider entry points and program design considerations and emphasize those that have the most impact on expanding participant life perspectives. For example, the settings most likely to be effective are found among the *4-H Events, Programs, and Camps* and *4-H Projects and Educational Opportunities* themes. We propose that recommended duration and types of experiences are found in the *Professional Skills and Leadership Development* and *Networking and Mentorship Opportunities* themes. Lastly, the level of programming may be considered across all suggested themes, including *Internal Influences*. Cultivating an environment where individuals feel safe and valued may promote a culture where expanding life perspectives is properly cultivated and encouraged.

An overarching recommendation for practice would be for 4-H educators to look for opportunities where multiple thematic areas may be layered to increase efficacy and experiential learning opportunities. The thematic area with the most retained items was *Professional Skills and Leadership Development*; therefore, we recommend items from this theme are purposively included in more traditional themes, such as *4-H Event, Programs, and Camps* or *4-H Projects and Educational Opportunities*. For example, we recommend that opportunities to engage with diverse groups are included in summer camp programming. Although it is very likely these opportunities are already occurring, the results of the present study support their ongoing use and inclusion. In this regard, our hope is that the list of items retained from the Delphi process can serve as a guide and reference for 4-H, extension, and agricultural educators.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations associated with the current study. Although measures were taken to minimize bias (Garson, 2014), the results are inherently influenced based on the experiences and insights of the expert panel and therefore are limited to insights, and perspectives of the panelists (Bodin & Crona, 2009). For example, the demographic composition of the Foundation Advisory Board is not necessarily reflective of the diversity among Georgia 4-H youth members. For example, 56% of Georgia 4-H youth members identify as white and approximately 29% of youth members identify as Black (Georgia 4-H, 2020); however, 90% of the Foundation Advisory Board members identified as white, while 10% identified as Black. An associated recommendation associated with the acknowledged limitation is to replicate this study with larger and more diverse populations to include more perspectives from underrepresented individuals.

Additionally, the age of the expert panelist and state in which they participated in 4-H may influence their opinions. For example, the experiences of the 70-year-old advisory board member reflecting on adolescent 4-H experiences are most likely different from the experiences of the 18-year-old advisory board member who recently participated in 4-H. Additionally, participants who were involved in 4-H programs from another state may have different opinions regarding influential experiences that are not representative of experiences in the Georgia 4-H program. Five members of the foundation advisory board were not involved with 4-H as youth members. Their insight is limited to the experiences they had with 4-H as an adult and may not reflect the insights of former youth members. The data used in this study was collected as part of a larger analysis of the Georgia 4-H program, and not all variables measured were related to alumni perspectives. Therefore, the insights of expert panelists who are not 4-H alumni are included, although they may not accurately represent the perspectives of 4-H alumni.

Furthermore, the use of internal personnel, in this case, those who serve in an advisory capacity for the Georgia 4-H program, may also limit the potential for external perspectives and insights from those not holding leadership positions within Georgia 4-H. We recommend further research replicate this study with 4-H alumni who have not served in a leadership position and determine whether they generate similar experiences and consensus agreements. Additionally, replicating or validating the findings with programs in different states may offer further insights.

At the individual item level, interaction with diverse groups was one of two items with a unanimous consensus agreement. While not novel, this finding may indicate that 4-H members are engaging with a more diverse set of individuals and life experiences than non-4-H members not provided an equivalent interaction opportunity. Based on this finding, we recommend 4-H programs purposively provide training and appropriate opportunities for members to learn the interpersonal and communication skills necessary to interact with individuals who are different from themselves. These differences are not just limited to race or ethnicity but can include more nuanced differences such as where the individual grew up (e.g., in the city or on a rural farm), visible and invisible disabilities, and socio-cultural backgrounds. As agricultural educators, particularly those engaged in extension and 4-H work, it is important to acknowledge and encourage diversity among participants and experiences. The results of the present study indicate this may have a dramatic influence in expanding 4-H members' life perspectives.

While creating and maintaining relationships with a diverse network of individuals is a highly desirable professional skill (Clark, 2012), there is also a need to promote collaboration and increase awareness of issues caused by perceived differences (Lamm et al., 2016). Accordingly, we recommend that 4-H educators continue to develop programming that promotes diversity and inclusion. For example, recruitment efforts should include interested individuals from various backgrounds to increase the opportunity for shared perspectives and experiences. Additionally, for geographic areas with a more homogenous population, we recommend that 4-H educators expose members to experiences of individuals from different cultural, racial, social, or educational backgrounds (Borron et al., 2019). We also recommend that 4-H educators explore the intersectionality between these backgrounds and critical topics in 4-H (e.g., environmental and agricultural issues, food insecurity, health and wellness).

The second item to achieve unanimous consensus was hearing dynamic speakers and listening to accomplishments they have achieved because of involvement in 4-H. Allowing members to listen to alumni testimonials can show members the benefits of 4-H participation and inspire them to reconsider what they want to achieve in 4-H. Holding testimonial and speaking events allows members to see themselves represented on a public platform by those who have a similar background or similar interests/career goals. These events may solidify self-confidence and illuminate the larger purpose behind 4-H. In practice, we recommend that 4-H educators frequently (e.g., once a month) offer

opportunities for members to hear from those who have been positively impacted by 4-H involvement. Educators can also promote diversity and inclusion by inviting speakers who represent a variety of backgrounds, skillsets, and knowledge. A practical application would be to provide members with opportunities to reflect how 4-H has impacted them and share this information with peers.

The results of the current study provide additional insights into the specific items and educational activities that have expanded 4-H life perspectives more specifically. These results should provide additional depth and clarity to the existing literature on the positive impact of 4-H on youth development. Additionally, the results should support and inform the efforts of agricultural educators, extension educators, and 4-H agents to foster expanded life perspectives amongst youth more generally.

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