Incorporating the Essential Elements of 4-H into Online Environments through Virtual Activity Clubs

A 4-H virtual activity club (VAC) meets over the internet to provide a focused learning experience on a single topic for a short period of time. During the COVID-19 pandemic that started in March 2020, 4-H programming was forced to adapt quickly to a virtual environment. Activity clubs are one of Maryland 4-H's established delivery modes. Offering them online was a natural fit for filling the void created by cancelled 4-H club meetings, summer camps, and other out-of-school-time activities due to the pandemic.

Although new to Maryland 4-H, VACs contain all the elements that have given Maryland 4-H its rich 100+ year history: hands-on learning, connections with peers and caring adults, and an inclusive, safe environment.

Virtual Clubs Have Advantages and Disadvantages

Virtual activity clubs offer many of the benefits of traditional 4-H programs. Going online also has advantages because virtual activity clubs:

▸ don't require travel, making it easier for some families to participate;

▸ are shorter in duration than community clubs which may appeal to families who feel overscheduled;

▸ are topic-based and may provide new-to-4-H families a stepping stone for participating in additional 4-H programming and opportunities;

▸ can be joined from anywhere in the state, widening the potential audience and allowing youth to interact with a diverse group of peers.

While VACs offer expanded opportunities for participants, there are some constraints. Accessibility to VACs may be limited to potential participants without reliable internet service. In addition, VACs require more preparation and planning because club leaders must:

▸ take additional precautions to ensure youth safety in an online environment;

▸ follow Maryland 4-H guidelines for interacting with youth in a virtual environment;

▸ make extra effort to create an engaging and welcoming environment since youth participants are likely to be spread across the state.

VACs Must Fulfill Specific 4-H Requirements

To offer online 4-H programs, a club must:

▸ have five or more youth from three or more families that are enrolled in 4-H Online;

▸ be led by two more 4-H educators or certified University of Maryland Extension 4-H volunteers;

▸ be chartered through the Maryland 4-H state office;

▸ provide at least six hours of instruction and/or learning activities for fewer than 16 weeks per calendar year.

Virtual Activity Clubs can be County-based, Cluster-based, or State-wide

Each audience has slightly different requirements. County and cluster-based VACs can start at any time throughout the year and are marketed and promoted locally. Statewide virtual activity clubs are offered quarterly, have promotional materials created by the state 4-H office, and are marketed as a group, or a "batch."

Decide the What, Who and How of the VAC

Start with a topic or interest.

Activity clubs center around a specific theme or topic that is explored over the course of the club meetings. Club leaders and youth will have the opportunity to learn, share, and reflect about a topic they find interesting. Topic examples may include animals, crafts, space, career exploration, nature, and coding.

Determine adult leadership and their roles.

Leaders are responsible for providing the logistics and structure of the club, helping youth enroll via the 4-H Online system, setting meeting guidelines, developing activities and material lists, completing reporting requirements, and communicating with club members. Once the club begins, club leaders' responsibilities shift to creating a positive learning environment, facilitating connection opportunities for youth, leading engaging and hands-on activities, and communicating upcoming meeting information with families.

Create a timeline.

A timeline ensures that all aspects of club development and logistics are addressed. It improves club organization and development and helps leaders meet requirements/ guidelines. Clubs that would like to include youth from across the state should follow the Maryland 4-H VAC timeline. County-based VACs may use the state timeline as a planning guide.

Develop a club framework/template.

Routine makes meetings flow more easily for club leaders and helps youth feel more comfortable because they know what to expect. A simple club framework could include:

- Welcome, introductions, icebreaker;
- Pledge of Allegiance and 4-H pledge;
- Sharing or reflecting from previous meeting;
- Game;
- Activity/lesson/guest speaker;
- Reflecting/connecting to life skills;
- Reminders for the next meeting.

Incorporate the essential elements of positive youth development (PYD) (belonging, mastery, independence, generosity).

Many aspects of positive youth development can be adapted for a virtual environment. As you plan your club framework and activities, consider the following questions (for ideas and examples, see Appendix A):

- How will you incorporate hands-on learning?
- How will you facilitate positive relationships among the youth and club leaders?
- How will you ensure that each youth is recognized and has a voice?
- What opportunities for youth leadership can you create?
- What opportunities for project-work sharing can you create?

VACs Operate Under a Charter and Require Distinct Leadership Roles

Follow the chartering process.

Virtual activity clubs are chartered in the same manner as in-person clubs. Leaders will work with their local 4-H educator to submit an activity club's:

- charter application;
- memorandum of agreement;
- program plan; and
- program report (within 30 days of the club's conclusion).

Determine leadership roles among club leaders.

Clearly delineating responsibilities among club leaders helps promote a positive experience for both leaders and members. Address who will:

- Complete and submit chartering documents;
- Create virtual meeting links;
- Communicate enrollment requirements to families;
- Monitor registration and the club roster;
- Send pre- and/or post-meeting reminders (include meeting link, materials lists, activity guides, videos, etc.);
- Take attendance; and
- Monitor chats during meetings.

Appendix A

Incorporating the Essential Elements of 4-H into Virtual Environments

Core Concept	Essential Element	Applications for Virtual Activity Clubs
Belonging	A positive relationship with a caring adult	Use polls and icebreaker questions to learn more about the youth. Take time to share your own responses. Include friendly conversation and appropriate "chit chat" during downtimes (while waiting to begin the meeting, during project work, during technical difficulties).
	An inclusive environment	Greet each youth as he or she "arrives." Make time for each youth to share his/her project. Use polls and ice breakers that allow for sharing of interests in addition to games that are "just for fun." Practice each of the features of your meeting platform so that youth feel comfortable and confident.
	A safe emotional and physical environment	Create a consistent club structure to foster a sense of predictability. Establish "norms" for the group. Cameras on or off? Microphone on or off? How will participants indicate that they want to share? Allow youth to "pass" when it is time to share and to opt out of playing a game. Monitor the chat function to ensure that it is topic-related and appropriate (private chat should be disabled). Understand and use the security settings of the virtual platform you will be using.
Mastery	Opportunity for mastery	Consider choosing activities that build upon each other, even if the skill advancement is a life skill (problem solving, for example). Include a type of recognition event at the conclusion of your virtual activity club. It could be presentations on a topic of their choice or providing each youth with a digital certificate and asking them to share their favorite club topic/project.
	Engagement in learning	Complete hands-on activities as a group by sending a materials list in advance. Create opportunities for youth to select a topic or mini project, work on it independently and then share with or teach the group.
Independence	Opportunity to see oneself as an active participant in the future	Create informal leadership opportunities within your club: ask for volunteers to lead the 4-H pledge, allow youth to generate future poll questions, suggest that youth lead the icebreakers. Create career connections to the projects your club is working on. Invite career-related guest speakers to give brief presentations at a meeting.
	Opportunity for self determination	At the first meeting, generate a list of topics to learn about as a group. Have club leaders select the first few activities and then create a menu of options that the youth can vote on for the final few activities.
Generosity	Opportunity to value and practice service to others	Allow youth to help solve each other's problems and answer each other's questions. Challenge youth to connect their project work to others-helping in their family, sharing with neighbors, making a difference in the community.

References

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