



Empowering Volunteers to Incorporate Workforce Readiness into 4-H Programs

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More than six million youth across the United States participate in 4-H, making 4-H the largest youth development organization in the country (National 4-H Council, 2021). Although each 4-H member can have an individualized learning experience based on personal project interests, a benefit that all members share is the development of life skills that prepare them for success in adulthood and in future careers. Volunteers play a key role in college and workforce preparation because they regularly create educational experiences that foster the development of life skills such as time management, responsibility, leadership, and teamwork. Because they reach youth in 4-H club settings and through outreach programs, volunteers have opportunities to highlight career connections that increase career knowledge and interest. By creating opportunities for college and workforce education, volunteers can help 4-H youth become competent and contributing members of society.

Importance of Youth College and Career Exploration

Authentic career enrichment experiences have been shown to provide workforce training and support the

skills development necessary for healthy career-related decision making (Cochran & Ferrari, 2009). Caring adults are essential for positive youth development and can be key to helping youth formulate and prepare to achieve their college and career goals. Whereas the caring adults in formal education are usually school-based faculty and staff, the caring adults in out-of-school time include child care center staff, volunteers, club leaders, and other community members. Opportunities for youth to explore potential career paths through 4-H may be integrated into club meetings or offered through special projects or programs.

There is a substantial body of research that supports the importance of creating opportunities for youth to explore their career interests. Early adolescents experience rapid and significant developmental changes, are eager to learn about topics they find interesting, and appreciate authentic learning opportunities (Caskey & Anfara, 2014). They are able to think about the future and develop personal goals (Kellough & Kellough, 2008). In comparison to younger children, youth in early adolescence are more aware of their personal interests, abilities, and values (Curry & Milson, 2017). These characteristics and emerging self-awareness make them well-positioned to benefit from college and career exposure and exploration during their adolescent years. In addition, Kerka (2000) noted that early exposure to career education and development can help to counterbalance the early formation of career-related sex role stereotypes and self-limitation that often occur in at-risk students, females, and minority groups.

College and workforce preparation education that begins at an early age is critical because many adolescents have a limited understanding of the knowledge and skills needed for success in the workforce (Johnson, 2000). The earlier that youth begin to learn about and prepare for careers, the greater the likelihood that they will experience a smooth transition from high school to

college and the adult workforce. 4-H volunteers can help provide this information to youth.

Easy Techniques for Incorporating Workforce Readiness into 4-H

4-H volunteers have a variety of options for infusing college and workforce readiness into the club meetings and other educational opportunities that they offer. Several options are listed below and are accompanied by implementation tips.

4-H Career Day. (Figure 1.)

Plan and lead a career day for 4-H clubs or other groups of youth. Volunteers have the option of working with their local 4-H faculty and staff to generate ideas related to program format, presenters, and career activities. A career day is suitable for a variety of settings including 4-H club meetings; after-school programs; and other evening, weekend, or summer programs. After deciding on the program details (format, date/time, location, etc.), volunteers can contact local service agencies, community organizations, and businesses to solicit presenters to speak about career opportunities and offer interactive, hands-on career activities. The local economic development office is an excellent resource for exploring local job opportunities, the major local employment sectors and trends, and potential career professionals to serve as presenters. Examples of professionals to invite to career day include government officials, police officers, first responders, health care workers, veterinarians, bankers and other financial workers, community college recruiters, chefs and food service workers, automobile mechanics, electricians, plumbers, technology workers, and small business owners. The list of presenters should be customized based on the local job market and the kinds of careers of interest to youth.

Below are sample questions and talking points that can be used to facilitate a presentation by a career professional.

- ▶ Who is your employer, what is your job title, and what are your main job duties?
- ▶ How did you become interested in this type of work?
- ▶ What type of education, training, and experience did you need to prepare for this work?
- ▶ Did you hold other positions prior to your current position, or did you participate in internships or special training to prepare for this work?



Figure 1. Volunteers increase career knowledge by hosting career days with workshops that highlight areas of interest to youth.

- ▶ What brings you the greatest joy or satisfaction in your work, and how does what you do make a difference in the community?
- ▶ What are the greatest challenges or disadvantages of your work?
- ▶ Do you have tips to share with people who are interested in pursuing a career similar to yours?

Parent Career Presentations.

During the club’s annual program planning meeting, talk with members about inviting parents to attend one or more club meetings and present about their careers. These types of presentations can be effective both in-person and virtually. To ensure that parent presentations will go smoothly, it is a good idea to survey the club members in advance to determine their own career interests. Members can contribute to the planning process by identifying questions that they would like to ask about each career. If they have difficulty coming up with questions, they can select questions listed in the section above. Allow the youth to discuss what their parents or guardians do for a living. If other members express interest in those careers, someone can invite the parents to be presenters. If certain parents are not comfortable presenting, they may be able to suggest dynamic speakers from their fields of work.

Youth Career Presentations. (Figure 2.)

Promote workforce readiness within 4-H clubs by allowing members to do independent research and give presentations about careers connected to the 4-H projects in which they are enrolled. Giving presentations can strengthen youth public speaking skills and illustrate



Figure 2. *Volunteers promote workforce readiness by encouraging youth to learn about careers and share their knowledge with other youth.*

real-life connections between 4-H projects and the workforce. Presentations may include the following information:

- ▶ Career title or career area selected
- ▶ Connections to 4-H projects
- ▶ Overview of job duties
- ▶ Educational requirements (college degree, certification, or other training)
- ▶ Volunteer or internship opportunities related to the career
- ▶ Average salary or hourly pay
- ▶ Work environment (office setting or outside work, set or flexible work hours, urban or rural setting, job outlook in the local area, travel requirements, etc.)

Professional Career Demonstrations.

Invite experts to demonstrate aspects of their work to members. Business and industry professionals are often willing to attend 4-H events and give high-interest demonstrations of work-related projects, skills, activities, or processes. Facilitating career demonstrations can be an excellent way to spark youth interest in specific careers. Examples of demonstrations include computer coding, 3-D modeling, automotive maintenance, water quality

testing, furniture construction or restoration, dog grooming, dairy cattle milking, cake decorating, landscape design, floral arranging/horticulture, and graphic design. The vast array of demonstration options is likely to include topics of interest to every youth.

Incorporating Workforce Soft Skills Instruction into 4-H

Career knowledge itself is not sufficient to prepare youth for entry into the workforce. Young adults also need a thorough understanding of skills for success in the workplace. Comprehensive workforce education should include soft skills training. The Society for Human Resources Management (2022) defines soft skills as “behaviors, personality traits, and work habits, such as collaboration, critical thinking, perseverance, and communication, that help people prosper at work.” As 4-H volunteers are developing career education plans for meetings and events, it is a good idea to also offer lessons that focus on soft skills development. Maryland 4 -H has several curricula/programs available that include lessons and activities suitable for use at 4-H club meetings and events. Typical soft skills lesson topics are listed below.

- ▶ Resumes: presenting yourself professionally
- ▶ Interviewing: identifying elements of good and bad interviews
- ▶ Dressing for Success: making a good impression
- ▶ Social Media Etiquette: maintaining a professional online presence
- ▶ Internships and Volunteering: identifying and acquiring career experiences
- ▶ College and Trade Schools: preparing for admission and success
- ▶ Salary Ranges: comparing income across positions and career sectors
- ▶ Career Planning: acquiring a job vs planning for a career
- ▶ Goal Setting: identifying your dream job and taking the steps to achieve it

Other Ways to Foster Workforce Readiness

Outside of a typical 4-H club meeting or event, volunteers may want to offer special learning opportunities and workshops related to workforce readiness. Sample authentic career and college exploration opportunities are described below.

Career Field Trip. (Figure 3.)

Organize a field trip to a workplace of interest to 4-H members. The trip can include a tour of the facility and demonstrations of processes and equipment in an authentic work setting. Experiences that allow youth to interact with people, places, and equipment related to a potential career are useful teaching tools because they can help youth better visualize themselves in that particular career. Examples of field trip sites include a government office, a local business, health care or animal care facility, manufacturing or engineering plant, warehouse or distribution center, and scientific research laboratory. The questions listed above for use during 4-H career days can also guide the field trip presentations if they are given to the presenters in advance.

Trade School or Training Center Visit.

Organize a visit to a local trade school or training center related to a career of interest to 4-H members. Having the opportunity to interact with people who offer instruction in an area of interest could inspire youth to continue investigating that career path. If students in the program or recent program graduates are available, consider asking them to speak with the members. They can often provide useful insights and perspectives about entry into the field.

Local College or University Tour.

Arrange a field trip to a local institution of higher education. First, survey 4-H members to determine the career areas that interest them. Next, find out which institutions offer degrees and certification programs related to those careers to help determine the most relevant locations to visit. Admissions offices and academic departments are usually open to having youth visitors. Some colleges even provide faculty, staff, or students to lead tours. If transportation is an issue, consider a virtual tour. Many colleges and universities offer virtual tours on their websites.



Figure 3. Volunteers arrange field trips that are useful for generating youth interest in a variety of career sectors.

Volunteer Support of Youth Participation in Work-Based Learning Experiences.

Encourage teens to explore and speak about the relationships between their work-related volunteer/ internship experiences and their 4-H experiences. In many geographic areas, school districts employ or find placements for youth workers. Sometimes the county/ city workforce development office has opportunities for paid work experience. Within the 4-H club setting, teens can develop communication, leadership, and mentorship skills as they teach other members about the connections between 4-H projects and the workforce.

Business and Industry Professionals as Guests Speakers or Judges for Competitions.

Invite professionals from the workforce to speak and serve as judges at 4-H competitive events and activities. Professionals are often open to serving as judges, sharing constructive feedback, as well as meeting with youth to talk about careers and ways that 4-H events promote workforce-knowledge gains and skills development. To better ensure positive interactions, consider meeting with the youth ahead of time to identify questions for the judges that can be shared with them in advance. Familiarity with the questions ahead of time can help a professional prepare talking points and feel more comfortable addressing youth, especially if it's their first time.

Volunteer Assistance with Internship Acquisition.

Speak with friends, colleagues, and co-workers to identify professionals who are willing to host teens for internships and similar youth volunteer experiences.

Many high school guidance counselors must keep track of hundreds of students and are relatively unfamiliar with the goals of some students. Adult 4-H volunteers tend to be familiar with the career interests of members. Volunteers can play an important role in helping teens acquire internships that support their career interests. Note that all 4-H safety protocols must be followed if an internship is classified as an official 4-H-sponsored internship as opposed to a school system internship. In Maryland, 4-H faculty, staff, and/or volunteers may need to be present to supervise internship experiences.

4-H Curricula and Local 4-H Programs

Maryland 4-H educators and state specialists have created workforce preparation curricula and programs that can easily be implemented and incorporated into 4-H club meetings and events. These programs and curricula can be taught in their entirety, or volunteers have the option of selecting and teaching specific lessons that are most relevant to their 4-H educational plans.

Curricula.

Career and workforce curricula contain a variety of lessons related to specific career sectors and/or soft skills development. These curricula are listed and briefly described below. Contact Maryland 4-H educators for more information about these curricula.

► University of Maryland 4-H Curricula.

- **Career AGsperience.** The curriculum’s six lessons have a goal of assisting youth with preparations for a successful career. The lessons explore career planning, resume development, internship acquisition, interviewing skills, business and social media etiquette, agriculture-related careers, and more.
- **AGsploration: The Science of Maryland Agriculture.** (Figure 4.) This curriculum was designed to increase middle school student agricultural literacy and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) skills. The curriculum consists of 24 peer-reviewed lessons with experiential, hands-on activities; a pre-packaged materials kit; and supplemental online resources. Each lesson is aligned with the Next Generation Science



Figure 4. Using simple materials, volunteers can easily teach hands-on 4-H lessons that help youth in clubs and other educational settings learn about careers.

Standards (NGSS) used by public schools. Topics include animal and plant agriculture, agriculture and the environment, and agricultural technology. The program was developed by University of Maryland Extension faculty with support from researchers and industry professionals.

- **Veterinary Science Experiences.** This curriculum and its associated program were designed to help youth interested in veterinary sciences explore what working as a veterinarian is actually like. Youth gain hands-on experiences with small and large animals in simulated environments.
 - **Babysitting/Entrepreneurship 101.** This six-hour course provides participants the tools needed to establish and lead a trustworthy professional babysitting business in diverse communities and settings. The materials easy to adapt and utilize for various teaching venues.
- **National 4-H Curricula.** Additional curricula that pertain to college and workforce readiness can be found on the National 4-H Council’s Shop 4-H website: shop4-h.org.

Local 4-H Programs.

Maryland 4-H educators and state specialists have worked diligently to create, implement, and evaluate programs that are focused on college and career readiness

and entrepreneurship. Feel free to investigate local programs with workforce preparation relevance for 4-H members. Your local 4-H educator can help you contact the faculty and staff who created these programs. Several Maryland programs are listed and briefly described below.

- ▶ **Summer of STEM.** This two-week college and career readiness internship program was designed to increase knowledge about career training, college, and workforce readiness in the areas of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM). The program has a goal of increasing the number of students who consider pursuing STEM-related college majors.
- ▶ **4-H Entrepreneurship Program.** The program allows youth to explore various aspects of operating and owning an agricultural business. They learn how to write and implement a business plan; keep diligent records of income, expenses, and inventory; apply for and manage a loan; write and implement a marketing plan; and strategically market products to customers.
- ▶ **Horsemanship 101.** This course focuses on the hands-on experiences that will educate, train, and prepare youth for college and career options in the equine industry. The goal is to teach youth the basic skills needed to become qualified for entry-level positions in the equine industry.
- ▶ **4-H Small Ruminant Research Academy.** The Academy allows youth to learn about and participate in the process of conducting applied research on sheep or goats. The goal of the program is for youth to become involved in scientific processes in order for them to gain a better understanding of applied research and field research.

Additional Resources:

In addition to the identified curricula and local programs, the following Maryland 4-H resources are also available.

- ▶ *Preparing 4-H Members for Interview Success fact sheet*
- ▶ Other organizations that partner with Maryland 4-H for college and career readiness:
 - Maryland Out of School Time Network (MOST)

- Maryland Business Roundtable for Education
- Maryland Youth Workforce Programs
- AgDiscovery Program at University of Maryland College Park and University of Maryland Eastern Shore
- National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)

Conclusion

College and career readiness is a vital component of 4-H youth development programming. Because 4-H volunteers play a pivotal role in fostering positive youth development, they have many opportunities to educate, inspire, and cultivate youth career interests, knowledge, and soft skills. Volunteers can help to guide youth through the process of exploring potential career paths that interest them. Whether providing opportunities through club meeting activities, curriculum implementation during special 4-H activities and program, or other specific college and workforce readiness activities, volunteers can inspire and cultivate interests and passions in the young people they mentor to support their workforce readiness education.

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