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## **Taking Congress Home: Effects of NC 4-H Congress on Youth Behaviors and Intentions**

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**Abstract:** This evaluation report describes the outcomes and quality of the 2006 North Carolina 4-H Congress, an annual five-day teen conference focused on citizenship, leadership, and service. A majority of returning youth cited Congress experiences as significant in their continued learning and practice in citizenship, leadership, and service learning. Likewise, most youth participants in the 2006 conference indicated that they planned to participate in more citizenship, community leadership, and service activities in their home communities. A Youth Program Climate survey revealed that youth viewed NC 4-H Congress as a setting where service was important, where they learned to accept differences, teamwork was emphasized, and where they were able to make a difference in the lives of others. Three implications of the evaluation report are discussed: 1) value of a youth leadership conference for educating and inspiring youth in citizenship, leadership, and service; 2) evaluation methodology, including engaging youth leaders in design and use of conference data; and 3) marketing and accountability opportunities resulting from program evaluations.

### **Introduction**

For some 80 years, North Carolina 4-H has conducted a five-day teen Congress incorporating a variety of activities shown to promote increased citizenship, leadership, and service. Activities have included presentations and performances, subject-matter workshops, service learning experiences, issues forum, officer elections, achievement recognition, and social events (Brockman, Tepper, & MacNeil, 2002; Roebuck, Brockman, & Tepper, 2002). Formal program components and informal "times out" are carefully planned to foster a balance of challenging and refreshing physical, social, and intellectual activities, and create a climate for positive youth development (e.g., Eccles, & Gootman, 2002).

Informal and anecdotal feedback from prior events suggested that the five-day experience provided sufficient intensity, duration, and breadth to increase youth knowledge and ability to apply lessons of 4-H Congress. However, like similar events in other states (Garst, et al., 2006), outcomes were not rigorously evaluated until recently.

In Summer 2006, a brief evaluation addressed questions related to:

- 1) program content: *Is NC 4-H Congress successful in achieving key objectives?* (e.g., preparing youth for citizenship, leadership, and service); and
- 2) program context: *Does NC 4-H Congress provide a climate that promotes positive youth development?* (e.g., through program traits related to positive outcomes).

This evaluation represented the second phase of an Empowerment Evaluation process (Fetterman, & Wandersman, 2004) and used program objectives recommended by a statewide review team (Green-Holley, Semon, & Safrit, 2004) as generic indicators of progress for this study. Content-related target outcome measures focused on behavior change impacts, following Bennett and Rockwell (1995). Returning participants reported “what they did,” rather than simply “what they learned” as a result of attending Congress the previous year. Current year participants reported aspirations, a short-term indicator in Bennett & Rockwell’s model. Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) found statements of behavioral intentions to be reliable predictors of future behavior. Youth perceptions of contextual supports and opportunities foster a climate for behavior change (Gambone, Klem, & Connell, 2002) and provide evidence that experiences such as 4-H Congress facilitate learning and behavioral outcomes.

## Methodology

*Participants* in the evaluation included 339 full-time delegates, ages 13-19 (220 female, 119 male) to 2006 NC 4-H Congress, approximately 88% of those with parent consent to complete the evaluation and 62% of all full-time delegates. Approximately 55% of the respondents (N=187) had attended a prior 4-H Congress.

*Instruments* included outcome, event satisfaction, and program quality measures. Retrospective (13 items for returning participants) and Prospective (13 items for 2006 participants) one-page surveys were designed to assess the impact of 4-H Congress on behavior (retrospective), knowledge and aspirations (prospective) for citizenship, leadership, and service (see Appendix A). Outcome surveys used a Likert-type five-point scale with response categories ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. Both surveys included an open-ended item asking youth to describe activities they pursued (or planned to pursue) as a result of attending Congress. Participants also rated 17 Congress events on a Likert-type five-point scale ranging from Highly Beneficial to Not Beneficial. Finally, participants completed a 24-item Youth Program Climate (PYC) survey based on best practices (Eccles, & Gootman, 2002; Peterson, 2001), plus five items related to impacts on family, friends, school, fun, and recommendation to others. The PYC used a four-item Likert-type scale ranging from Always to Often to Seldom to Never in order to determine the consistency of quality climate across the 4-H Congress experience (see Appendix B).

Data collection was coordinated by youth development professionals and volunteers, under direction of a state specialist. Retrospective surveys were completed on the first day of 2006

Congress. All other surveys were completed on the last night of the event. Analysis of data was completed using SPSS Version 15 software (SPSS, 2006).

## Results

The first formal evaluation of NC 4-H Congress revealed positive results for both content and context indicators. As seen in Appendix A, the vast majority of returning participants reported greater knowledge of civic issues and responsibilities, and subject-matter as well as expanding friendships. Most followed up on the experience by becoming more involved in community leadership, citizenship, and service during the school year. A large majority also became more involved in cultural activities, 4-H activities, 4-H recognition applications, and 4-H presentations or projects and recruited others to attend the next 4-H Congress. Appendix A reveals that 80-90% of respondents to the 2006 Congress Prospective survey agreed that they increased knowledge of and involvement in citizenship, leadership, and service activities. Youth rated all events as highly beneficial, with Hands-to-Service projects and assembly, state presentation contest, and Honor Club Tap-In identified as most beneficial. Hands-to-Service was also positively cited in open-ended responses.

The climate of NC 4-H Congress was also rated positively. Appendix B shows that respondents felt safe, welcomed, supported by adults, afforded skill-building and teamwork opportunities, and encouraged to accept differences, serve others, and make a difference. Over 70% indicated that they learned things that would help them in their family, friendship groups, and in school.

The evaluation was implemented as planned, but its timing, late on the last night of the event, may have increased respondent fatigue. Nevertheless, nearly 90% completed all questionnaires and missing data accounted for only 5-7% of possible responses. Reliability analyses indicated high internal consistency for the Retrospective survey (alpha = .79), Prospective scale (alpha = .88), Events scale (alpha = .86), and Climate scale (alpha = .88).

## Discussion

This evaluation suggests that brief, but intensive residential learning experiences for teens can contribute to year-round growth in citizenship, leadership, and service. Returning participants cited prior experiences at Congress as instrumental in increasing learning and involvement in youth leadership and community activities. Behavioral intentions of current year participants were consistent with those trends. Youth also identified the event context with traits of safety, support, and challenge typical of programs that promote positive youth development (Eccles, & Gootman, 2002). Data confirm the value of residential experiences in general (Garst, et al., 2006) and of leadership and service learning components (Brockman, Tepper, MacNeil, 2002; Roebuck, Brockman, Tepper, 2002) in youth development. Moreover, data indicate that involvement in an intensive, state-level event and involvement in home communities create a mutually reinforcing cycle.

The intensive residential experience brings together youth motivated to learn and serve. The supportive and challenging climate of the event affirms shared identity, broadens experience, and increases the sense that youth can make a difference. Consistent with the Theory of Reasoned Action (Ajzen, & Fishbein, 1980), Normative Beliefs regarding leadership and service may shape *and* strengthen Subjective Norms for individuals. This pattern was evident in open-

ended comments about the “Hands-to-Service” activity in which respondents valued time with friends as much as service and making a difference for others. Beliefs about leadership, service, and personal efficacy drawn from an intensive event can be strengthened further by subsequent successes in youths’ home communities.

Several lessons learned from the results and process of NC 4-H Congress may help youth professionals replicate and improve their programming. Evaluation is most useful and meaningful when targeted to an organizational mission or event objectives. Engaging youth in planning and leading the event helped establish the right balance of work and play critical for positive climate and outcome results. Although the evaluation process was well-received by youth, greater effort to integrate feedback opportunities with relational (e.g., adult listening and support) and educational (e.g., reflecting on experience) goals of the program might increase its relevance and benefit for youth. For instance, informal feedback from 4-H professionals indicated that discussions of their experiences following evaluation were among the most affirming and insightful experiences of the week for youth.

Positive feedback about the quality and outcomes of an intensive, residential event enables youth professionals to make a stronger case in marketing and accountability. As consumers, parents have concerns about the safety, as well as the benefits of many programs available for their children. Evaluation feedback from youth confirms the promises made by delegation leaders, the organizational code of ethics, and promotional brochures. Likewise, the evidence that participants apply learning and return for more demonstrates accountability to current and future funders, including parents.

Youth professionals could build on study results in several ways. Planning teams can use such informal feedback together with formal evaluation results to improve programming and evaluation for future conferences. Evaluations in subsequent years might explore how *particular* strategies promote, or fail to promote, *specific* skills and behavior for specific groups of youth. In addition, monitoring of year-round learning and action could identify community-based supports and opportunities needed to maximize readiness for an intensive event or application of learning from the event. Comparisons across diverse events and youth organizations and with control groups of unaffiliated youth will produce more reliable generalizations on results of intensive and/or year-round programs.

Evaluation of NC 4-H Congress provided concrete evidence of its quality and impact as well as a substantial foundation for program improvement, training, and in-depth evaluation going forward. Significantly, the evaluation demonstrated that a five-day intensive hands-on learning experience not only facilitates learning but enables youth to “take Congress home,” applying lessons of leadership, citizenship, and service on their own, throughout the year.

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## Appendix A

Retrospective and Prospective Views of Congress Participants:  
is NC 4-H Congress Meeting its Objectives:

### 4-H Congress Youth Retrospective and Prospective Views

<i>As a result of participating in 4-H Congress, I...</i>	Retro- spective	Pro- spective
...gained/plan to gain greater knowledge of current issues	76	80
...gained/plan to gain greater knowledge of civic responsibilities	85	80
...expanded and strengthened friendships	93	95
...learned many new ideas in subject-matter workshops	69	80
...became/plan to become more involved in leadership in my community	82	85
...participated/plan to participate in more citizenship activities	79	83
...became/plan to become more involved in community service	82	84
...became/plan to become more involved in cultural activities (cultural fairs, art shows, music or drama performances, cultural exchange)	58	69
...expanded/plan to expand 4-H involvement (number or variety of 4-H- related activities)	82	89
...completed/plan to complete an application for recognition of 4-H work... (cumulative records, scholarships, national trip, Honor Club)	59	73
...completed/plan to complete a presentation, project, or judging event (presentation, project record, judging team)	84	83
...recruited/plan to recruit others to attend 4-H Congress	73	88

*Percentage who Agree/Strongly Agree*

(Retrospective N=187; Prospective: N=339; Missing data approximately 3%)

## Appendix B

### Youth Program Climate: Does NC 4-H Congress Provide a Climate for Positive Youth Development

#### **Youth Program Climate** *Percentage responses*

	Always	Often	Seldom	Never
I felt safe from being hurt or injured	68	27	3	2
I was embarrassed or put down	8	8	20	64
Activities promoted healthy habits	48	40	9	2
Adults listened to what I had to say	40	43	13	4
I felt comfortable going to adults for advice	52	32	12	4
Other kids cared about me	51	38	9	2
Activities taught me to develop a plan to reach my goals	40	44	12	4
I was challenged to think and build skills	36	43	16	5
There were opportunities to learn new subjects	51	38	9	2
I felt that I could make a difference	42	43	15	0
I was encouraged to take responsibility	58	30	10	2
Learning from mistakes was more important than perfect performance	52	37	9	2
Conflicts were worked out peacefully	43	42	12	3
I learned to work with others as a team	57	36	5	2
Serving others and volunteering was important	71	23	3	2
I felt like I belonged	57	35	6	2
All kinds of kids were welcomed	72	20	6	2
I learned to accept differences in others	66	29	5	0
Rules and expectations were clear to me	60	32	6	2
Discipline was not too strict, not too loose	47	33	14	5
Activities were just right for my age	40	44	13	3
I gained a broader view of 4-H	61	30	7	2
My view of things beyond my community was expanded	53	35	10	2
Activities were relevant to issues in my club, my family, my community	45	39	14	2
I had fun at this 4-H activity	67	29	3	0
I learned things that will help me do better in school	39	41	16	4
I learned things to help me make friends	52	30	15	3
I learn things that help me in my family	37	33	24	6
I would recommend this event to friends	77	17	4	2

(N=339; missing data approximately 3% per item)