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**Successful Use of eXtension and Online Training  
Modules in Mandatory Biennial Volunteer  
Recertification**

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**Abstract:** Quality volunteers are essential to the success of 4-H programs. Although much attention has been paid to the initial orientation of volunteers, additional training is typically optional. Beginning in 2013, our county required all adult volunteers to complete at least one hour of continuing education as part of a biennial recertification process. We used existing resources ("eLearning for Volunteer Orientation"; eXtension webinars). There was no significant difference in volunteer retention between re-screening and non-re-screening cohorts ( $p=.855$ ). We collected 166 volunteer ratings of 23 recorded webinars on eXtension. Volunteers gave concrete examples of how they would use the information learned in their volunteer role.

**Introduction**

Orientation and training are linked to volunteer effectiveness, retention, and satisfaction. Research on the effectiveness of initial orientation of volunteers has led to it becoming standard

practice in all 4-H programs nationwide. However, despite research showing the benefits of additional training, 4-H programs rarely require it and the types of programs vary widely.

There is frequent mention in the literature, in published “best practices,” and in program policies of providing a strong initial training for volunteers. Volunteer orientation is implicated in improving 4-H program quality and volunteer satisfaction (e.g., Ouellette, et al., 2014; VanWinkle, et al., 2002). Other Extension volunteer programs, especially those with the “Master” title, require several hours of initial orientation and topical training (for example, see <http://articles.extension.org/pages/9925/state-and-provincial-master-gardener-programs:-extension-and-affiliated-program-listings> for a list of state Master Gardener programs requiring a training for certification) . Youth scouting programs also require volunteer orientation (see <http://www.scouting.org/Training/Adult.aspx> for a listing of orientation courses from the Boy Scouts of America and <http://www.girlscouts.org/en/adults/volunteer/volunteer-resources.html> for volunteer orientation courses for Girl Scouts).

The National 4-H Learning Priorities group (Pleskac, et al, 2010) identified seven main components to staff competency in Volunteerism. Six of the components are focused on the period prior to and through the initial orientation, or on the structure of the management system. In the category “Sustainability of Volunteer Efforts,” the report highlights supervising and coaching, managing performance, recognition, and evaluation of volunteers.

The Volunteer Research Knowledge Competency taxonomy (Culp, et al, 2008) identifies a spectrum of general skills that all 4-H volunteers should have, grouping them under the headings Communications, Organization, 4-H Program Management, Educational Design & Delivery, Positive Youth Development, and Interpersonal Characteristics. Fox, et al (2009) and Cook, et al (1986) both found that experienced 4-H volunteers desire both these broad skills and subject matter skills. Developing volunteer confidence through training in Positive Youth Development and subject matter skills is vital to promoting sustained, high-quality volunteer-youth interactions (Arnold, et al, 2009).

Research shows that that an increase in skills and knowledge is a benefit of volunteering (Fox, et al 2009). Long-term volunteers readily report this as well. In a study across Extension areas, volunteers reported access to research information, technical knowledge, and self-improvement among the most important benefits they receive (Braker, et al, 2000). In an Israeli program for youth-at-risk, established volunteers listed new skills and knowledge, additional skills and experience, and a feeling of accomplishment as benefits that led to their satisfaction with their role (Haski-Leventhal and Bargal, 2008). A survey of Master Gardener volunteers showed that 81% were “highly interested” in increasing their skills through continuing education (Moravec, 2006).

Limitations on staff time and expertise may be largely responsible for the lack of required continuing education programs offered to 4-H volunteers. Parks, et al (2011) found that while there was a need for horse project training for the growing state program, only about half of 4-H Extension Agents reported having a personal background or experience with horses. County 4-H programs offer clubs a menu of many different project areas (our county has 68); it is unlikely that county staff will be experts in all these areas. While the mentoring methods suggested by the National 4-H Learning Priorities group (Pleskac, et al, 2010) could be highly successful, one-on-one volunteer development takes considerable staff time. Our county has

nearly 400 volunteers; giving each volunteer 2 hours annually of individual mentoring would consume .4 FTE of a faculty assignment.

Limitations on volunteer time are also a consideration. Every state offers 4-H volunteer workshops, regional Leaders' Forums, and encourages volunteers to engage in program advisory and development committees. A common concern from staff is that despite offering quality programs, volunteers fail to take advantage of them, so staff are hesitant to make training required. Asynchronous online learning appeals to volunteers because they can complete modules at a time convenient to them (Robideau & Vogel, 2014; Ouellette, et al 2014). Many counties and states have successfully mandated online modules for new volunteers; our county uses the "e-Learning for 4-H Volunteers" modules analyzed in Ouellette, et al (2014).

A small but growing number of 4-H and similar programs are requiring continuing education for volunteers. As of September 2016:

- The Oregon Master Gardener Program requires continuing education each year in the classroom or online.
- Some youth development programs require an annual or biennial child safety training (examples: Oklahoma 4-H, Boy Scouts of America)
- Oklahoma 4-H requires four continuing education events per year, in person or self-study.
- Ohio 4-H requires participation in an annual volunteer training
- Kentucky 4-H requires key horse and livestock leaders to maintain a volunteer certification by completing 2 hours of approved in-person or online training.
- Michigan 4-H requires Shooting Sports volunteers to attend an in-person training at least once every three years.

### **4-H Volunteer Recertification Requirements**

Beginning in 2013, the Clackamas County 4-H program mandated that all long-term volunteers meet a continuing education requirement as part of biennial recertification. This coincided with a new statewide requirement that volunteers complete a Criminal History Check (CHC) every two years. For our experienced volunteers (who started prior to 2005), this was the first time they had completed the CHC.

Our county chose to recertify our volunteers in cohorts: volunteers born in an even year recertify in even years, and those born in odd years recertify in odd years. Before re-enrolling in the fall, volunteers who are up for recertification must turn in the CHC paperwork and complete at least one hour of education.

In 2013 and 2014, the continuing education requirement was to complete the four modules of "eLearning for 4-H Volunteers" (2006 version). These interactive modules can automatically send completion notifications to a state contact. At that time, we had adopted these modules for new volunteers but our long-term volunteers had not taken them. Expecting concerns over the use of technology, we also offered volunteers a print version of the modules or they could make an appointment to come in to the office for technical assistance.

Beginning in 2015, a new source of relevant, asynchronous, online learning was sought. We directed volunteers to watch at least one hour of educational programming available from [eXtension.org](http://eXtension.org), a growing, central, nationwide source for Extension information. This site mixes print, video, images, and dynamic online interactions to create learning environments for Extension professionals and the general public.

We provided a list of 12 pre-recorded webinars that seemed especially relevant to working with youth or to popular project areas. Volunteers were invited to choose one of these or *any* eXtension program(s) that appealed to them. Following the webinar, volunteers were required to submit a questionnaire (created in Google Forms). The questionnaire asked the volunteer to evaluate the quality and relevance of the webinar, share specific items they learned, and explain how they would apply what they had learned.

Each year a small number of volunteers in the appropriate odd/even cohort are not asked to recertify or are given a modified process.

- New volunteers were not asked to recertify; our University will not process CHC's less than 24 months apart.
- Two elderly volunteers donating limited time were given the CHC only.
- Volunteers who enroll in more than one county program are only rescreened in their home county.

## **Analysis of Program Effectiveness**

### **Volunteer Retention and Adverse Reactions**

Data on volunteer retention and adverse reactions were collected and analyzed for the past three years and compared to two years before the start of the recertification program. Implementation of the volunteer recertification program has, on the whole, been seamless and positive. Since we were already creating a system to manage biennial background checks, it took minimal effort to add on a continuing education requirement. A slight increase in staff time was needed to track continuing education requirements and provide technical assistance to volunteers who were unfamiliar with online learning.

Anecdotal positive responses to the system have outnumbered the negative ones. Positive responses focus on learning something new, the importance of background checks to youth safety, and the convenience of online learning. The negative responses have been primarily about putting more demands on volunteers' busy schedules and frustrations with technology. Most technology questions were easily answered with printed instructions, by email or by phone (the most common volunteer issue was that Adobe Flash does not work on mobile devices). Although a non-technology option was made available in 2013-14 and 2014-15, no volunteers chose to use it. Only one volunteer required staff assistance to complete eLearning modules in the Extension office. Options were given in 2015-16 to allow certain in-person trainings to count for recertification, but no volunteers relied on this method.

Retention rates (Table 1) were compared for five years. We used the total retention rate for each cohort per year in our data analysis, although the rate tended to be slightly higher if considering only the volunteers who were eligible to recertify. This is likely due to volunteer

retention being lowest in the first year. Annual total volunteer enrollment is roughly the same each year due to the addition of new volunteers.

**Table 1**

Retention rates of volunteers with and without a continuing education requirement.

Year	Leaders re-enrolled (even birth year) <i># re-enrolled/# enrolled previous year</i>	Retention rate <sup>E</sup>	Leaders re-enrolled (odd birth year) <i># re-enrolled/# enrolled previous year</i>	Retention rate <sup>O</sup>	Recertification requirements
2011-12	158/182	86.8% <sup>NR</sup>	164/191	85.9% <sup>NR</sup>	None
2012-13	169/197	85.8% <sup>NR</sup>	181/211	85.8% <sup>NR</sup>	None
2013-14	152/192	79.2% <sup>RNA</sup>	160/208 <i>154/187 completed rescreening</i>	76.9% <sup>RA</sup>	Odd years, at least 2 years of service: eLearning Modules, Criminal History Check
2014-15	145/186 <i>143/176 completed rescreening</i>	78.0% <sup>RA</sup>	166/200	83% <sup>RNA</sup>	Even years, at least 2 years of service: eLearning Modules, Criminal History Check
2015-16	134/173	77.5% <sup>RNA</sup>	155/186 <i>139/162 completed rescreening</i>	83.3% <sup>RA</sup>	Odd years, at least 2 years of service: eXtension video, Criminal History Check

Biennial recertification began in the fall of the 2013-14 4-H year. Recertification is done by cohort, separated by birth year. Shaded squares show cohorts that were required to complete recertification steps that year. "Year" is the year in which they re-enrolled; it is compared to enrollment in the previous year. Superscripts show the data analysis group (E= Even years; O=Odd years; NR=No Rescreening year; RNA= Rescreening year, No Action required; RA=Rescreening year, Action required).

Our hypothesis was that there would be no difference between Even and Odd cohorts, no difference in retention prior to and after implementing the recertification program, and that there would be no difference between cohorts within recertification years. A single factor ANOVA showed a significant difference between groups (F=8.704, p=.012) so additional comparisons were analyzed with t-tests (two-tailed; after a Bonferroni correction, the significance level for the t-tests is p=.017). There was no difference between Even and Odd years (t=-.588, p=.572). There was a significant difference between retention in 2011-2013 (NR) and cohorts that were not asked to recertify in 2013-2016 (RNA) (t=4.44, p=.007). This could suggest a negative effect of recertification. However, there was no difference between the cohorts within each of the recertification years (RNA versus RA, t=.195, p=.855). This more relevant control suggests that there was not a decrease in volunteer retention due to recertification requirements. If the recertification had been the cause of the modest drop, we

would have expected to see a higher retention rate for the Even cohort in 2013-14 than we observed.

**Table 2:**

Volunteer Use and Preferences of eXtension Webinars

Name and link	Length of webinar (listed on website)	# who watched this webinar	Mean rating of Quality	Mean rating of Usefulness
<b>Webinars recommended by the County 4-H program</b>				
<a href="#">Livestock First Aid</a>	60 min	39	3.9	3.8
<a href="#">The Ins and Outs of Adolescent Brain Development</a>	60 min	27	4.3	4.0
<a href="#">Developing Real Sportsmanship in a Reality Show World (Horse)</a>	60 min	22	4.0	3.9
<a href="#">Enhancing Biosecurity at Fairs and Shows</a>	60 min	16	3.7	3.8
<a href="#">10 Free Online Tools to Create 4-H Learning Activities</a>	90 min	14	4.2	4.3
<a href="#">Special Needs in the Child Care Setting: What You Need to Know About ADHD and ASD</a>	60 min	11	4.1	3.5
<a href="#">Preparing Poultry for Show</a>	60 min	9	4.0	3.9
<a href="#">*Working with Youth and Dogs</a>	30-40 min	4	3.5	3.0
<a href="#">*Taking your 4-H Members and Their Dogs Beyond the Local 4-H Show</a>	30-40 min	3	3.3	3.7
<a href="#">Moving Up the Ladder of Youth Engagement</a>	60 min	3	3.3	3.3
<a href="#">Extension &amp; the Maker Movement</a>	45 min	2	4.0	3.0
<a href="#">Inquiring Minds Want to Know: Science for Young Children</a>	60 min	2	3.5	3.5
<a href="#">4-H Health Club Challenge</a>	90 min	1	3	3
<b>Webinars located by Volunteers</b>				
<a href="#">Spring Cleaning: Getting your Horse Ready for the Show Season</a>	60 min	3	4.0	3.7
<a href="#">Developing Youths' Life Skills Through Equine Activities</a>	60 min	2	3.0	3.5
8 different videos		8	3.6	3.3

\* From the collection of videos listed on the recertification list as "[Companion Animal Webinars \(4-H Emphasis\) \(Dogs & Cats\)](#)"

Volunteers reported the webinar(s) watched and answered questions about the program on a Google Form. Volunteers rated the "quality of the educational content" as well as "how useful

the webinar was to your role as a 4-H Volunteer.” The quality and usefulness ratings were coded for analysis (Poor=1; Fair=2; Good=3; Very Good=4; Excellent=5).

### **Volunteer Use of eXtension Webinars**

Questionnaire results were compiled and analyzed to determine which webinars were most appealing and what kinds of information were valued by the volunteers (Table 2). A total of 139 volunteers watched 166 pre-recorded webinars. Some watched more than one to meet the requirement of one hour of continuing education. Of those, 153 chose webinars from our list of suggestions. Thirteen recertifying volunteers chose webinars that were not on our list, suggesting that at least that many browsed the eXtension website for interesting topics.

Popular topics were those related to animal science (i.e., livestock first aid, biosecurity), Positive Youth Development (i.e., brain development, special needs youth), and teaching life skills (i.e., sportsmanship, youth activities,). Volunteers rated the quality of most webinars in the “good” to “very good” range for both quality and usefulness. Volunteers reported that the actual recording lengths differed from those listed on eXtension, with many “60 minute” sessions lasting only 45-50 minutes (we gave credit for the published length).

On the response form, 153 volunteers gave specific ideas of how they would apply what they had learned (Table 3). Many answers were lengthy and detailed. We grouped similar responses and assigned titles to each category. Thirteen gave nonspecific responses or simply named topics that were presented in the webinar.

**Table 3**

## Volunteer intended actions as a result of continuing education

Category of Comment	#	Sample comment
Health/Safety of People and Animals	39	"Encourage the kids not to eat or have drinks in the barn. Encourage the kids not to share animal equipment such as water buckets."
Promoting Youth Independence	21	"Encourage kids to get more involved in other 4-H activities such as public speaking & presentations. Focus more on goal setting and helping kids achieve their goals."
Seek Additional Info/Knowledge	17	"I am going to seek to be more involved with the Maker movement in my 4-H area."
Teaching and Mentoring	15	"Based on their ages (10-15), involving each member in a discussion of the work to be done prior to submission of County Fair projects, identifying the steps required and setting a timeline for the work and what help will be needed from me."
Sportsmanship	11	"... Watching horse training videos and talking about the learning process each new step takes will help kids understand and hopefully celebrate each small victory with their horse as they learn. In doing this, my hope would be that the child's focus would be more on the work and time they put in daily, rather than the ribbons at a show. Remembering the show is only a small part of their time spent with their horse... Something as a leader I need to remember is that although our club's focus is horses, incorporating fun events such as going bowling or a movie night is beneficial in building teamwork and sportsmanship."
Encourage Positive Behaviors	11	"I will continue my efforts in teaching the kids to always ride their best no matter what is happening. If a child is having a hard time emotionally they need to not take it out on their horse or parent, they can take a walk and shake it off. I will use the term "respect your horse" more often, I really like what that stands for."
Apply New Knowledge	10	"By understand the biology of the brain and how it impacts the behavior of a teenager, I will be much more in tune to listen to them, be understanding of choices they make and guide them to make good choices with support and education."
Show Video to Club	9	"I will forward this webinar to my 4-H members and encourage them to choose one of these tools to create a game or presentation to use at a club meeting."
Role Model	7	"Explaining and modeling expectations of behavior; Being very specific about planning will help with developing this skill; Remembering that their brains are still developing when mistakes are made."
Allow Failure	7	"Don't "rescue" from every situation- let the adolescent make the right decision or help them work through the consequences."
Encourage Service	6	"I would like to encourage my 4-H club kids to start participating in more community events where they can plan, organize and conduct various service events."
Nonspecific	13	"Very helpful, informative, and interesting."



Volunteers completed a form after viewing their selected webinar on eXtension. They gave open-ended responses to the question, "Please provide 2-3 examples of how you will apply what you learned to your work as a 4-H Volunteer Leader." Results were categorized and counted. A sample comment from each category is included.

## Conclusions

Requiring volunteers to complete recertification requirements was met with little resistance and quickly incorporated into our normal organizational culture. We received more positive comments than negative ones about requiring updated background checks to ensure child safety. Online education was readily accepted. Not one volunteer used the off-line options we provided, and only one requested in-person technical assistance. Our county is a mix of urban, suburban, and rural areas. Some outlying homes do not have good internet availability, but this did not appear to be a hurdle for volunteers.

Volunteers articulated concrete things learned and ideas for incorporating what they learned into their leadership role. Their comments were insightful. Many volunteers indicated they would make a behavioral change. A future area of inquiry could be a follow up study to see if volunteers implemented their strategy.

Retention rate remained high after implementing the recertification process. There was no significant difference in retention between the half of volunteers due to recertify and the half that were not. We did find a decrease in retention on both groups (recertifying and not recertifying) the first year we started the process. This is unexpected but may be associated with a decrease in club program size from a peak in 2012-13 to 15% fewer members in 2015-16. The most common reason that 4-H volunteers stop enrolling is that their children are no longer in 4-H (Boone, et al, 2013; White & Arnold, 2003).

Our findings support the creation of additional online resources that can be used by a broad range of volunteers both within and external to Extension. In order to prioritize staff time to creating the process (not the content), we capitalized on existing volunteer online trainings and then on recorded webinars rather than developing original material. This was effective; there is much available and 4-H volunteers have a wide range of interests. New training options continue to be created and shared. The "eLearning for Volunteers" series will be updated for 2017. New content is uploaded daily to eXtension. States are developing their own learning modules (Robideau & Vogel, 2014), some of which are shared nationally.

The webinar selection on eXtension was robust enough for our purposes, but volunteers note issues of program quality (ratings of "good" to "very good" on average, but not "excellent"). Most of the videos we found were recordings of webinars. Webinars lose their interactive quality when watched at a later time. The eXtension site does not separate content for professionals versus volunteers which may have meant that some webinars were not as applicable to volunteers.

We would like to see more interactive learning modules on eXtension; these would have been more suitable for our purposes. We would also support the addition of a feature to allow users to report or track that they have watched a video or completed a module. This would save our volunteers the extra step of completing a form to report their participation. Awarding

certificates, badges, or other signs of completion of continuing education would give a sense of accomplishment and achievement to volunteers.

We recognize that using a central source for volunteer continuing education, even one developed by the 4-H organization or within our state, does not cover all volunteer needs. Mentoring, program committee meetings, and training on emerging local issues continue to be relevant. Volunteers in previous studies have requested training related to member and volunteer opportunities (Cook, et al, 1986; Fox, et al, 2009) which may be specific to particular regions and projects. Some topics may be very specific by state or county such as risk management, child safety reporting requirements, or required paperwork. For example, our team has identified management of 4-H funds as a module we would like to create locally and require for volunteers.

Our long-term goals for this management strategy are that (1) our volunteers are empowered and capable of the role assigned to them, (2) volunteers are driven to be lifelong learners, recognizing Extension as a leader in informal education, and (3) our 4-H program quality is improved, increasing the positive impact on 4-H youth. Our data show that volunteers learned new skills, easily navigated eXtension and found applicable information, continued to volunteer, and intend to convert knowledge into practice. We recommend that mandatory continuing education for volunteers be adopted as a best practice in the field of Positive Youth Development.

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