

“The Right Tools at the Right Time”: Improving Volunteer Education and Support

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Abstract

Success of the 4-H Youth Development (4-H) program relies heavily on the recruitment and retention of volunteers who implement 4-H programs. 4-H volunteers—in turn—rely on program professionals to



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continually improve the education and support systems they need to succeed. In this study, the researchers used a mixed-methods survey based on the 4-H Volunteer Research and Knowledge Competency (VRKC) taxonomy across the Washington State 4-H program to uncover (a) what education volunteers want for themselves and their county program, (b) what challenges they face in their role, and (c) what they need to succeed. The results of this study indicate that program professionals may improve volunteer education and support systems by focusing on 4 essential volunteer needs: (a) supportive teams; (b) engaged youth and families; (c) facilitation skills in experiential education and positive youth development; and (d) effective program administration, communication, and information systems. While this study focuses on 4-H, the results and implications may be relevant to other youth development programs that are charged with educating and supporting adult volunteers.

Key words: 4-H, VRKC, volunteer education, volunteer needs, volunteer support

Introduction and Review of Literature

As with many youth development organizations, 4-H Youth Development (4-H) relies heavily on volunteers to implement programming, especially within its club program model (Borden et al., 2014; Van Horn et al., 1999). In the 4-H club program model, adult volunteers guide youth members in building leadership and life skills as they “learn by doing”—working together on project-based activities (e.g., gardening, robotics, photography) and community service (Washington State University Extension, 2016).

4-H volunteers, often called “leaders,” broaden the reach of 4-H far beyond what professionals could accomplish alone. By leading clubs and educational events for youth, training and mentoring other 4-H volunteers, and participating in shared-leadership systems at county and state levels, volunteers are vital to 4-H’s success (Radhakrishna & Ewing, 2011; Smith et al., 2005). While 4-H relies on volunteers to expand reach, volunteers rely on 4-H to provide them with the right tools at the right time.

It is essential that youth development organizations, such as 4-H, whose success hinges on the work of volunteers, uphold both the quantity and quality of their volunteer force (Borden et al., 2014; Culp & Bullock, 2017). Volunteer involvement alone does not equate to program success (Bolton, 1992). Volunteer involvement must be backed by relevant education and support systems (Culp & Bullock, 2017; Fox et al., 2009), which is the best retention and recruitment tool program professionals can wield (Van Horn et al., 1999).

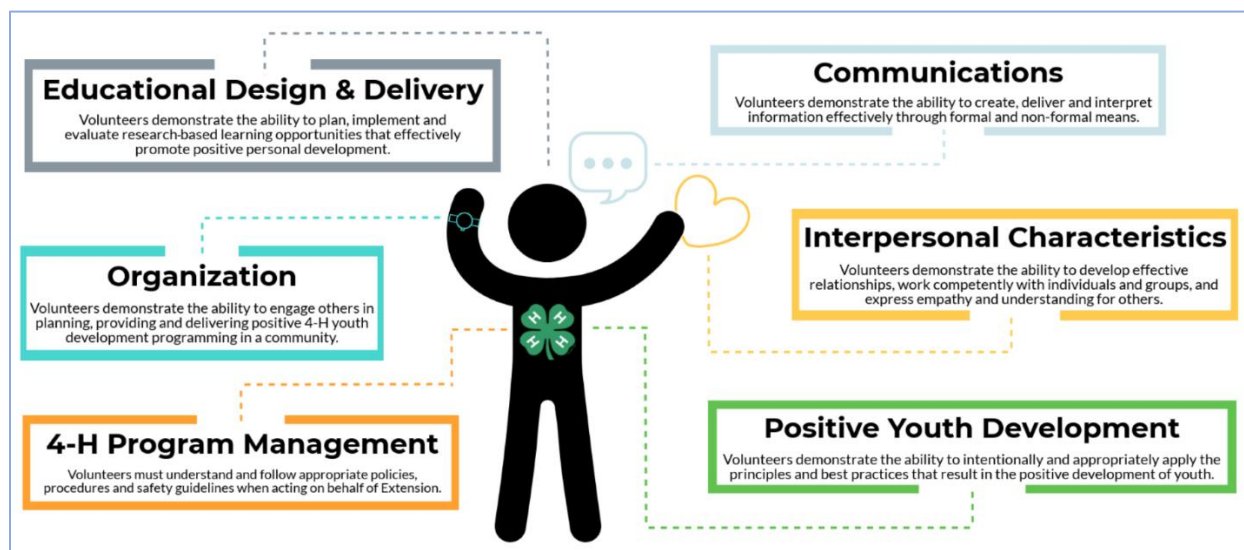
Volunteer Education

In previous studies (Culp et al., 2007; Fox et al., 2009), 4-H volunteers have identified a mix of top priorities, including

- positive youth development education (i.e., team-building skills, leadership development)
- program-specific education (i.e., member opportunities, club management)
- organization and communication skills (i.e., parent recruitment and involvement, use of technology)

While researching modern-day 4-H volunteer needs, Culp et al. (2006) also found a broad mix of needed skills, from which the Volunteer Research and Knowledge Competency (VRKC) taxonomy was developed. The VRKC taxonomy is a comprehensive list of 43 competencies that 4-H volunteers need to fully succeed in their role (Culp et al., 2007; Nestor et al., 2006). In 2008, National 4-H Headquarters approved the taxonomy, intending it to serve as the foundational framework guiding education for 4-H volunteers nationwide (Culp & Pleskac, 2016). As seen in Figure 1, the VRKC taxonomy features six domains.

Figure 1. Volunteer Research Knowledge and Competency (VRKC) Taxonomy Domains



Despite volunteers and researchers calling for education across multiple disciplines, it is common for 4-H volunteer education to focus more on the basics of 4-H program management

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rather than on other foundational VRKC domains, such as positive youth development and educational design and delivery (Arnold et al., 2009).

According to adult learning theory, adult learners are characterized by self-direction, a desire to draw from their life experiences, a problem-centered approach, and an interest in immediate application of new knowledge (Knowles et al., 2005; Merriam, 2008; Merriam & Bierema, 2014; Ota et al., 2006). Volunteers may be initially seeking what is viewed as “nuts and bolts” topics serving an immediate need, such as basic program management. However, 4-H professionals must meet the challenge of facilitating volunteer education focused on all foundational disciplines in a way that adheres to adult learning theory, teaching all VRKC domains with clear relevancy and practical application.

This challenge is especially pressing as many 4-H staffing and delivery models have shifted in ways that increase the need for volunteers to understand and support these disciplines as their primary responsibility (Arnold et al., 2009). However, multiple studies suggest that 4-H volunteer education has not kept pace with the changing needs of volunteers within these evolving models (Arnold & Dolnec, 2008; Arnold et al., 2009). If 4-H professionals do not educate and support volunteers in facilitating positive and effective educational environments, we cannot ensure that youth do, in fact, “learn by doing” in 4-H and experience outcomes aligned with positive youth development (Arnold et al., 2009).

Volunteer Support and Retention

In addition to education, effective program administration is a foundational need for volunteer success (Bortree, 2011; Hager & Brudney, 2004). Frustration or confusion with program administration can lead to low morale and a perceived lack of supportive relationships with program professionals (Accountemps, 2013; Sheptak & Menaker, 2016).

4-H volunteers who feel valued and supported are more likely to experience satisfaction in their role and stay involved, and therefore, are ultimately more beneficial to the program (Arnold et al., 2009). This theme is also seen in volunteer programs outside of 4-H. Boezeman and Ellemers (2008) and the UPS Foundation (1998) found that volunteer commitment is primarily based on the quality of the program support they receive and the perceived value of their work. Simply put, volunteers are likely to stay involved in programs they identify as well-led and likely to leave those they view as poorly-led (Terry et al., 2013; UPS Foundation, 1998).

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Engaging volunteers' motivations is another powerful retention tool (Serafino, 2001). Saitgalina (2018) found that two types of motivation—social/altruistic and exploring/growing—and one type of satisfaction—the satisfaction of working with others towards a common goal—were most prevalent among over 26,000 volunteers at professional organizations across the United States. These results echo what numerous studies have found within 4-H programs: volunteers are primarily motivated by positive social interaction at the family and community level, and a desire to help others (Culp & Schwartz, 1999; Fritz et al., 2000; Fritz et al., 2003; Henderson, 1981; Reimer et al., 2004).

Study Objective

Continually improving volunteer education and support in ways that ignite volunteers' motivations is crucial to volunteer recruitment and retention (Arnold et al., 2009; Van Horn et al., 1999). With this in mind, we studied the following research questions:

- What education do volunteers want for themselves and their county 4-H program?
- What challenges do volunteers face in their role, and what do they need to succeed?

While this study surveyed only 4-H volunteers in Washington State, we suspect that the results and implications are relevant to other state 4-H programs and other youth development programs outside of 4-H that are charged with educating and supporting adult volunteers.

Methods

We developed and fielded a mixed-methods survey based on a modified version of the 4-H VRKC taxonomy to evaluate Washington State's 4-H volunteer education and support systems. This approach, including both quantitative (i.e., multiple-choice questions) and qualitative (i.e., open-ended questions) data, allowed for triangulation, thus increasing the validity and reliability of the findings (Cresswell & Plano, 2010).

Sample and Recruitment

Before fielding, the instrument was piloted on paper across three county 4-H programs. Data collected from 127 pilot surveys suggested the instructions and questions were sufficiently clear. Following the pilot, no questions were modified; however, the survey was redesigned to be fielded using Qualtrics, a web-based survey platform.

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All 39 county-based 4-H programs in Washington State were invited to participate in the study. Fifty-four percent of counties ($n = 21$) participated in the post-pilot study. Study participants were recruited through their county 4-H office, which shared the study invitation with all enrolled 4-H volunteers. Each county 4-H office received a dissemination protocol to follow, which included a template introduction and reminder emails to send at 3- and 6-week intervals.

Invitations were sent to 2,524 4-H volunteers, representing 43% of all Washington State's 4-H volunteers at the time of the survey. Survey responses were collected for 2 months (April-May 2015), with 441 volunteers participating, yielding a 17% response rate. Of those who responded, the completion rate was 86% ($n = 379$).

Survey Instrument

In this article, we report on three sections of the survey:

- volunteer demographics
- VRKC-based self-assessment
- open-ended questions

Volunteer Demographics

Demographic questions included volunteer type, years as a volunteer, and county of participation. During the study, 4-H volunteer roles in Washington State included the following:

- **general club leader:** responsible for a club's overall management.
- **project leader:** responsible for facilitating youth learning in a specific project area.
- **activity leader:** responsible for short-term events or chaperoning.
- **resource leader:** provides intermittent or one-time support in a club or project area.

Respondents selected the role they most identified with. The role "other" was added to capture volunteers solely serving in middle-management roles, including county-level or committee-level leadership.

VRKC-Based Self-Assessment

Educational needs were assessed using a slightly modified version of the VRKC taxonomy composed of 39 competencies within the six domains. Seven competencies were modified (e.g., reworded, added, combined) in an effort to increase their relevancy to the respondents. All modifications are located in the Appendix.

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For each competency, respondents were asked to select one or more of the following:

- **personal interest:** I want to know more about this skill/subject.
- **personal confidence:** I am confident in my abilities with this skill/subject.
- **county need:** Training in this skill/subject is needed to improve our county program.
- **uncertainty:** I am not sure.

Open-Ended Questions

Two open-ended questions were included in the survey:

- “What challenges have you experienced as a 4-H leader in [specified] county?”
- “What do you need to be successful in your role within the 4-H program?”

Data Analysis

Quantitative

For each primary measure, quantitative analyses were conducted using SPSS, a statistical analysis platform. Descriptive statistics were used to identify frequencies for each competency. Nonparametric tests were used to identify how volunteers ranked the competencies in relation to (a) personal interest, (b) personal confidence, (c) county need, and (d) uncertainty.

Qualitative

The open-ended questions were analyzed through coding. Before beginning data analysis, an a priori coding scheme was created (Miles et al., 2013; White & Scanga, 2019) based on the VRKC taxonomy. Three members of the research team piloted the scheme for process validity and clarity. After the pilot, two team members independently coded the responses for both questions and generated themes from the codes. For more details on this process, review White & Scanga (2019).

Many responses did not fit into VRKC domains or competencies, so an inductive coding system was developed (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Because post-analysis revealed thematic similarities between the two open-ended questions, an overarching code system was created to group responses within three major themes and their associated subthemes.

Results

Respondent Demographics

Nearly half of respondents were general club leaders ($n = 185$), a position requiring increased levels of responsibility and engagement. Additionally, over half of respondents were long-term volunteers ($n = 238$) with 6 or more years of experience.

Table 1. Respondent Demographics

	Sample Size (n)	Percentage of Total Sample
Volunteer role		
General club leader	185	43%
Project leader	109	26%
Activity leader	24	6%
Resource leader	50	12%
Other	59	14%
<i>Not enrolled</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>did not continue the survey</i>
Years as a Volunteer		
0-1 year	48	11%
2-5 years	134	32%
6-9 years	69	16%
10+ years	169	40%

Note. Volunteer type ($n = 441$). Years as volunteer ($n = 420$).

VRKC-Based Self-Assessment

Personal Interest

The top five highest-ranked competencies of personal interest all related to teaching, facilitation, and engaging others in programming (Table 2). The competencies volunteers were least interested in learning more about are within the “interpersonal characteristics” domain (i.e., honesty, ethics, and morality, demonstrating compassion and care; Appendix).

Table 2. Top Five Competencies Volunteers Want to Know More About

Rank	Competency	% Respondents	VRKC domain
1	Team-building skills	32%, $n = 103/327$	Educational design & delivery
2	Parent recruitment and involvement	31%, $n = 105/339$	Organization
3	Delegating tasks to parents	30%, $n = 101/335$	Organization
4	Use of multiple teaching strategies	29%, $n = 94/330$	Educational design & delivery
5a	Use of technology for communication and education ^a	28%, $n = 95/342$	Communications
5b	Motivating and encouraging youth	28%, $n = 94/335$	Positive youth development
5c	Incorporating community service-learning ^a	28%, $n = 93/327$	Educational design & delivery
5d	Empowering youth	28%, $n = 92/330$	Positive youth development

^a See Appendix for modification details.

Personal Confidence

In general, volunteers were confident in their abilities, with 50% or more of respondents reporting confidence in 72% ($n = 28$) of the competencies (Appendix). Volunteers broadly identified the “Interpersonal Characteristics” domain as an area of confidence (Figure 2; Appendix). All three organization domain competencies that volunteers were least confident in related to recruitment, involvement, and delegation (Table 3).

Table 3. Top Five Competencies Volunteers were Least Confident In

Rank	Competency	% Respondents	VRKC domain
1	Marketing and public relations	30%, $n = 102/342$	Communications
2	Parent recruitment and involvement	33%, $n = 113/339$	Organization
3a	Use of technology for communication and education ^a	40%, $n = 135/342$	Communications
3b	Youth recruitment and involvement ^a	40%, $n = 136/337$	Organization
4	Program evaluation methods	41%, $n = 132/323$	Educational design & delivery
5	Delegating tasks to parents	43%, $n = 143/335$	Organization

^a See Appendix for modification detail

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County Need

The top five competencies identified by volunteers as needed to improve their county program are all within the domains of organization and communications (Table 4).

Table 4. Top Five Competencies Identified for County Program Improvement

Rank	Competency	% Respondents	VRKC domain
1	Parent recruitment and involvement	43%, $n = 147/339$	Organization
2a	Marketing and public relations	38%, $n = 129/342$	Communications
2b	Use of technology for communication and education ^a	38%, $n = 129/342$	Communications
3	Youth recruitment and involvement ^a	37%, $n = 124/337$	Organization
4	Delegating tasks to parents	34%, $n = 113/335$	Organization
5	Teaching ^a	23%, $n = 110/343$	Communications

^a See Appendix for modification details

Uncertainty

All but one of the top five competencies volunteers were unsure about are within the domains of educational design and delivery or 4-H program management (Table 5).

Table 5. Top Five Competencies Volunteers Identified as Unsure

Rank	Competency	% Respondents	VRKC domain
1	Marketing and public relations	22%, $n = 75/342$	Communications
2	Program evaluation methods	20%, $n = 64/323$	Educational design & delivery
3	Organization and structure of Extension	19%, $n = 60/324$	4-H Program management
4	Application of experiential learning	17%, $n = 54/320$	Educational design & delivery
5	Risk management and risk reduction	16%, $n = 52/326$	4-H program management

Overall VRKC Self-Assessment Results

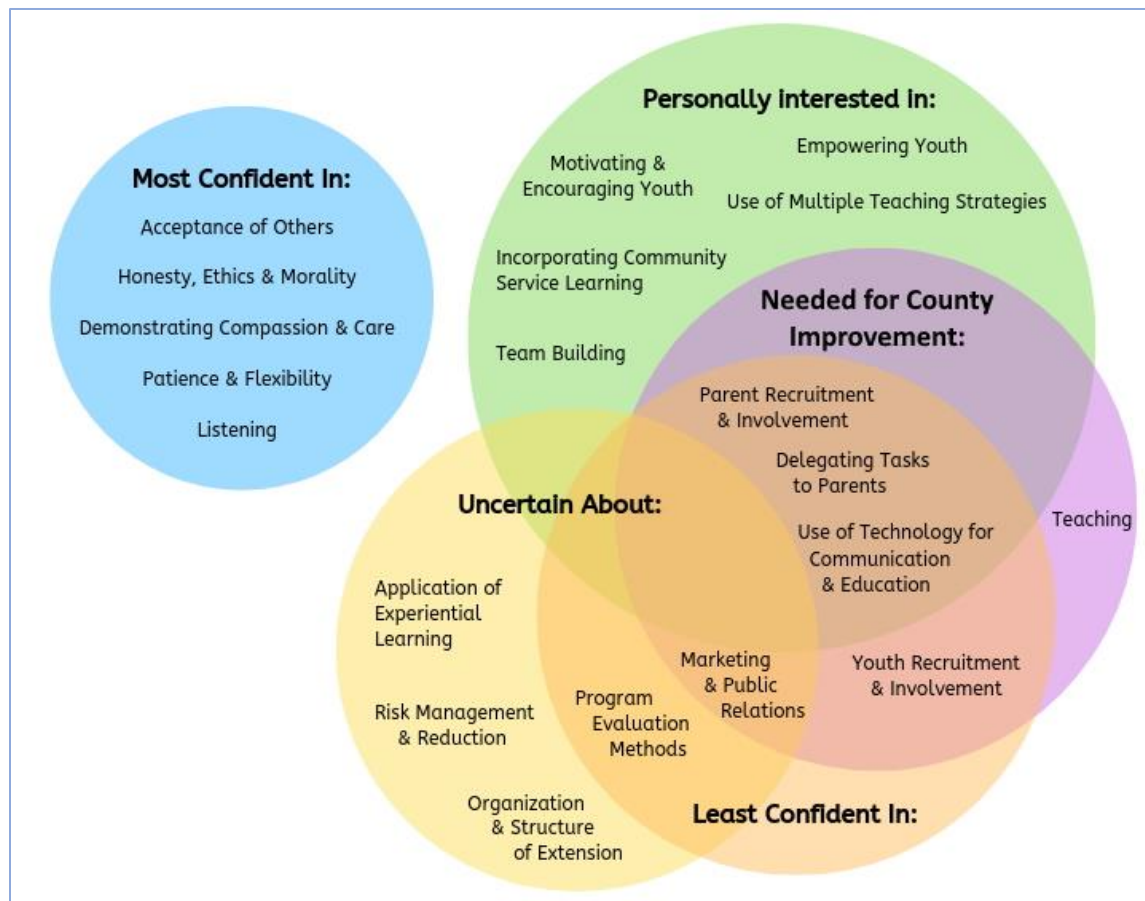
Of the 39 competencies measured, five were repeatedly selected by volunteers as areas of personal interest, low personal confidence, or county need (Figure 2). All five of these competencies are within the domains of organization or communications:

- parent recruitment and involvement

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- delegating tasks to parents
- use of technology for communication and education
- youth recruitment and involvement
- marketing and public relations

Figure 2. VRKC Self-Assessment Top-Ranking Competencies per Category



VRKC-Coded Challenges and Needs for Success

VRKC-coded responses from the—what challenges have you experienced ($n = 340$) and what do you need to be successful ($n = 285$)—open-ended questions were combined within three response themes:

- Theme 1: Supportive relationships
- Theme 2: Program administration and communication
- Theme 3: Youth and family engagement

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Theme 1: Supportive Relationships

Overall, 344 responses were coded to the *Supportive Relationships* theme—more than any other theme—representing 55% of all responses from both open-ended questions. Volunteers' challenges included conflict with program professionals, other volunteers, and parents/caregivers, and lack of help from others (Table 6). Volunteers' needs for success included support and help from others, networking and mentorship opportunities with other 4-H volunteers, and motivation and encouragement (Table 7).

Table 6. "Challenges" Sub-Themes of the *Supportive Relationships* Theme

Sub-theme	Percent response, concepts, and quote	VRKC domain
Conflict with other adults	<p>Thirty percent of respondents ($n = 102$) were challenged by negative working relationships with other adults in the program (e.g., volunteers, program professionals, parents/caregivers) and displayed distrust of one another's motives or capacity.</p> <p><i>"Some adults were not putting the kids first. They have [their own] agendas"</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communications • Interpersonal characteristics • Organization • 4-H program management
Lack of help	<p>Seventeen percent of respondents ($n = 57$) were challenged by what they perceived as inadequate help from other enrolled volunteers, potential volunteers, and parents/caregivers. Common challenges include recruiting help, and assumptions of others' disinterest in helping.</p> <p><i>"everyone wants the events but very few step up to help make them happen"</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communications • Interpersonal characteristics • Organization • 4-H program management

Table 7. “Needs for Success” Sub-Themes of the *Supportive Relationships* Theme

Sub-theme	Percent response, concepts, and quote	VRKC domain
Support and help from others	To succeed, 51% ($n = 144$) of respondents reported a need for support, timely help, good communication, and teamwork from many individuals and groups, including parents/caregivers, program professionals, other volunteers, other 4-H clubs, and the community. <i>"The continued support of [the program professionals], leaders, parents and clubs. These folks already make it easy for me to do my job!"</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communications • Organization • 4-H program management
Networking and mentorship opportunities with other 4-H volunteers	To succeed, 6% ($n = 18$) of respondents reported a need for opportunities to network and communicate with other 4-H volunteers. Several volunteers explicitly mentioned mentorship programs. Networking suggestions ranged from structured leader retreats to informal contact lists of topic experts. <i>"I would like a directory of 4-H leaders, program specialists, superintendents, county leaders, etc. so you know who to call with questions. I think a mentor program for new leaders is essential."</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpersonal characteristics • Educational design & delivery
Motivation and encouragement	To succeed, 6% ($n = 17$) of respondents reported a need to feel valued, see the positive impact of their commitment to 4-H, and be recognized for their contributions. <i>"A genuine 'thank you' to show appreciation - not just the achievement pin."</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpersonal characteristics

Theme 2: Program Administration and Communication

Overall, 257 responses were coded to this theme, representing 41% of all responses from both open-ended questions. This theme related less to specific educational needs and more to overarching needs for improved program management. Volunteers' challenges included poor communication and support from program professionals, poor resource access, and confusing or complicated program requirements (Table 8). Volunteers' needs for success included education and information, simple processes and paperwork, and funding (Table 9).

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Table 8. “Challenges” Sub-Themes of the *Program Administration and Communication* Theme

Sub-theme	Percent response, concepts, and quote	VRKC domain
Poor communication, support and resource access from the 4-H office	<p>Twenty-four percent of respondents ($n = 82$) were challenged by information shared from the 4-H office that was confusing, in conflict with previous messaging, not timely, hard to access, or not relevant. Program professionals may not complete tasks quickly enough. Volunteers were also challenged by a need for updated, relevant project-based resources.</p> <p><i>"I feel like I am jumping in blind as a project leader with no connections/resources."</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communications • Interpersonal characteristics • 4-H program management
Confusing or complicated requirements	<p>Thirteen percent of respondents ($n = 44$) were challenged by a variety of program requirements, including new volunteer processes, the logistics of starting a new club, following financial policies, and securing program locations.</p> <p><i>"Confusing and daunting for new leaders to get involved. Lots of work, forms, rules (and politics) to keep track of. Hard for working parents to feel like they can become Club Leaders."</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpersonal characteristics • 4-H program management

Table 9. “Needs for Success” Sub-Themes of the *Program Administration and Communication* Theme

Sub-Theme	Percent response, concepts, and quote	VRKC domain
Education and information	<p>To succeed, 22% of respondents ($n = 64$) reported a need for information and educational resources that are timely, relevant, and easily accessible; clear policies and roles/responsibilities; opportunities for new and continuing volunteer education; project-based information/education; opportunities for networking and sharing information with other volunteers.</p> <p><i>"To have the right tools at the right time. 4-H leadership training is really great and very beneficial."</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communications • Educational design & delivery • Interpersonal characteristics • Organization • Positive youth development • 4-H program management

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Table 9. (continued)

Sub-Theme	Percent response, concepts, and quote	VRKC domain
Simple processes and paperwork	To succeed, 9% of respondents ($n = 25$) reported a need for required processes and paperwork to be user-friendly, efficient, and consistently applied. <i>"Have someone clear the administrative roadblocks so we can work with the youth . . ."</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization • 4-H program management
Funding	To succeed, 6% of respondents ($n = 17$) reported a need for adequately funded 4-H offices, staffing, and programs. Volunteers specifically mentioned a trend of decreased funding for 4-H and a need for club fundraising support. <i>"[Another] support staff person at the [local] office . . ."</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization • 4-H program management

Theme 3: Youth and Family Engagement

Overall, 175 responses were coded to this theme, representing 28% of all responses from both open-ended questions. Volunteers' challenges included scheduling activities and engaging youth in programming (Table 10). Volunteers' needs for success included youth recruitment and engagement skills and time management and organizational skills (Table 11).

Table 10. "Challenges" Sub-Themes of the Youth and Family Engagement Theme

Sub-theme	Percent response, concepts, and quote	VRKC domain
Complex schedules	Seventeen percent of respondents ($n = 57$) were challenged by increasingly complex schedules—their own and those of families—and activity locations may create participation barriers for some. <i>". . . families involved in 4-H are also involved in many other things, they have busy lives, while they may want to be involved, they do not have a lot of time to commit . . ."</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communications • Educational design & delivery • Organization • 4-H program management

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Table 10. (continued)

Sub-theme	Percent response, concepts, and quote	VRKC domain
Disengaged and absent youth	<p>Sixteen percent of respondents ($n = 53$) were challenged by youth members who seem disengaged from project work and activity participation.</p> <p><i>"trying to find new ways to engage youth in meaningful activities."</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educational design & delivery • Positive youth development • 4-H program management

Table 11. "Needs for Success" Sub-Themes of the *Youth and Family Engagement* Theme

Sub-theme	Percent response, concepts, and quote	VRKC domain
Youth recruitment and engagement skills	<p>To succeed, 13% of respondents ($n = 36$) reported a need for resources and tools to recruit and engage youth participants. Patience and flexibility were repeatedly mentioned as needed skills, especially in connecting with busy and diverse youth and families.</p> <p><i>"I think as with anything patience. . . . [Be] willing to adjust to how to guide 4-H members, not all are [alike]."</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communications • Educational design & delivery • Interpersonal skills • Organization • Positive youth development • 4-H program management
Time management and organizational skills	<p>To succeed, 10% of respondents ($n = 29$) reported a need for more time and the ability to engage families who can commit to 4-H. Volunteers desire to be more organized when it comes to scheduling meetings, planning projects, and completing paperwork.</p> <p><i>"Organization on my part . . . I need to keep fairly close record of what gets done in each project meeting as it helps with assessing time commitment in the future."</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization • 4-H program management

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Overall VRKC-Coded Challenges and Needs for Success Results

Coding results from the open-ended questions support the results of the VRKC-based self-assessment by illuminating specific—yet repeatedly referenced—challenges and needs of volunteers (e.g., parent recruitment and involvement, delegating tasks to parents, youth recruitment and involvement). Seven of the top 10 competencies of need found within the “challenges” and “needs for success” results are within the domains of organization* or communications[†]:

- ability to develop and strengthen relationships
- club management
- planning and organizing*
- parent recruitment and involvement*
- delegating tasks to parents*
- patience and flexibility
- time management*
- use of technology for communication and education[†]
- youth recruitment and involvement*
- marketing and public relations[†]

Discussion and Implications for Improving Volunteer Education and Support

All five of the top competencies selected by volunteers as areas of personal interest, low personal confidence, or county need (i.e., parent recruitment and involvement, delegating tasks to parents, use of technology for communication and education, youth recruitment and involvement, marketing and public relations) are also within the list of the most coded competencies from the “challenges” and “needs for success” questions. The results alignment between the VRKC-based self-assessment and VRKC-coded open-ended questions suggest that these topics—all related to engaging program youth and families—are clear priorities for volunteer education.

In addition to needs related to engaging youth and families in programming, the open-ended question results emphasized a need for education to increase interpersonal (i.e., ability to develop and strengthen relationships, patience and flexibility) and basic organizational skills (i.e., planning and organizing, time management). Allowing study participants a space to articulate specific challenges and needs for success also highlighted opportunities for foundational administrative improvement that could have otherwise been missed.

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The results of this study indicate that 4-H professionals, particularly those who support club-based programming, may improve volunteer education and support systems by focusing on four essential volunteer needs:

- Need 1: supportive teams
- Need 2: engaged youth and families
- Need 3: facilitation skills in experiential education and positive youth development
- Need 4: effective program administration, communication, and information systems

Discussion and implications related to each of the four needs are detailed below.

Need 1: Supportive Teams

Throughout the survey, volunteers articulated a strong need for connecting to and building functional team environments in order to feel valued, run successful programming, and maintain sustainable roles. To aid volunteers in feeling valued within positive working relationships, program professionals should provide orientation and resources that enable volunteers to understand their value within the program, their role within the shared-leadership team, and where to go for support. Valued roles and positive social connections may engage volunteers' main motivations—social/altruistic and growing/exploring—resulting in increased rates of volunteer retention and satisfaction (Arnold et al., 2009; Boezeman & Ellemers, 2008; Saitgalina, 2018; Serafino, 2001; UPS Foundation, 1998).

Demonstrating Value

Creating a positive team environment starts with program professionals. Providing timely support and "*clearing the administrative roadblocks,*" as one respondent put it, can go a long way towards demonstrating that volunteers are valued. However, intentional recognition of volunteers' value is also essential (Hager & Brudney, 2004). Extrinsic rewards and public recognition events are common in 4-H, but efforts need not be costly or time-consuming, as volunteers report that the most meaningful forms of recognition are often personal thank-you notes and "pats on the back" (Culp & Schwartz, 1998; Fritz et al., 2003; Stillwell et al., 2010).

Role Within the Shared-Leadership Team

4-H is at its best when volunteers, youth, parents/caregivers, and professionals work together in shared-leadership teams within organized councils, committees, task forces, and ad hoc working groups (Snider, 1985). Alongside an overview of the shared-leadership model, 4-H

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professionals should provide volunteers with organizational charts that illustrate the local, state, and national systems they work within, a need Arnold and Dolenc (2008) noticed in the Oregon 4-H program and one seen within this study.

Accessing Support and Strengthening Relationships

Many volunteers reported a lack of connection to and support from other 4-H volunteers, relationships they labeled as a "need for success." To facilitate the development of these relationships, program professionals should consider initiatives to help volunteers network and develop mutual purpose and trust, such as

- including volunteers as peer-educators (Cassill et al., 2012)
- establishing volunteer mentorship programs (Culp et al., 2010; Shelstad, 2018)
- offering social and team-building events (Stillwell et al., 2010)

Volunteers also need supportive relationships with youth participants and their parents/caregivers. The development of these relationships, alongside those with 4-H volunteers and professionals, is strengthened by a host of interpersonal characteristics like the "ability to develop and strengthen relationships," which was the most commonly coded competency within the open-ended responses.

Despite reporting a need for better teamwork and ranking competencies related to building supportive teams as the top three competencies they want to know more about (e.g., team-building skills, parent recruitment and involvement, and delegating tasks to parents) the volunteers in this study were less interested in learning about the VRKC domain of interpersonal characteristics than any other domain. Fox et al. (2009) saw this same dynamic among Louisiana 4-H volunteers who also identified team-building skills and parent recruitment and involvement in the top 10 most helpful volunteer education topics while simultaneously devaluing interpersonal skill-building.

In alignment with the study results and adult learning theory (Knowles et al., 2005; Merriam, 2008; Merriam & Bierema, 2014; Ota et al., 2006), volunteers should have opportunities for relevant, experiential, and practical interpersonal skill-building (Table 12).

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Table 12. Volunteer Education to Build Supportive Teams

Adult-learner need	Associated topic, techniques, or tools
<p>Relevant education</p> <p>Training and resources should be intentionally framed within clearly relevant topics (Knowles et al., 2005; Ota et al., 2006).</p>	<p>According to study results, VRKC topics related to interpersonal skills most desired by volunteers include</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • team-building skills • parent recruitment and involvement • delegating tasks to parents • motivating and encouraging youth • youth recruitment and involvement • ability to develop and strengthen relationships • patience and flexibility
<p>Experiential education</p> <p>Training should focus on experiential techniques that draw from the previous experiences of adult learners (Merriam, 2008; Ota et al., 2006).</p>	<p>Examples of experiential techniques include</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • problem-based learning • case studies • educational games • role play
<p>Practical education</p> <p>Training should be practical (Knowles et al., 2005; Ota et al., 2006), and provide useful resources and tools.</p>	<p>Examples of practical tools include</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • position descriptions for supporting roles (Cassill et al., 2012; Culp, 2013) • parent/caregiver interest surveys (New Jersey 4-H, 2019) • team-building activity guides

Need 2: Engaged Youth and Families

The vitality of 4-H programming—particularly within the club program model—relies on engaged youth and families, and previous studies suggest that parent/caregiver engagement is a crucial factor influencing youth retention in 4-H (Defore et al., 2011). Study results indicate that volunteers desire and need help with engagement, including facilitating supportive teams, clear communication, and effective learning environments. These findings are supported by previous studies, which also found that organizational skills—such as recruitment, involvement, communication, and technology use—are highly ranked by both 4-H volunteers and professionals as important educational topics (Culp et al., 2007; Fox et al., 2009).

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Based on volunteers' open-ended responses, youth and families may be disengaged due to multiple factors including

- complex schedules
- poor communication or organization within the club/program
- ineffective learning environments (e.g., not experiential, youth-centered, or developmentally appropriate)
- unsuccessful recruitment
- downstream effects of poor support from program professionals

Lewis et al. (2018) and Astroth (1985) also found that poor program communication (i.e., misunderstood goals, activities, meeting times, and time commitment), not feeling welcome or included, not feeling connected to other youth in the club, and conflicting time commitments were the most common reasons for disengagement.

Just as 4-H volunteers need supportive relationships with their peers and 4-H professionals, program participants require the same of them to feel welcome, valued, and understand how the team works and their role within it. Youth and their families cannot engage in what they do not understand or value.

In alignment with the study results and adult learning theory, volunteers should be provided experiential education that features practical tools and resources, and opportunities to learn from experienced volunteers (e.g., discussion, roundtables, panels) regarding

- youth and family recruitment, retention, and valued involvement (e.g., welcoming and orienting new youth and families, delegating to parents/caregivers, empowering and supporting 4-H youth)
- communication strategies
- using technology for communication and education (e.g., communication apps, social media, websites)
- youth-centered approaches and engaging youths' interests (Arnold et al., 2014; Nova Scotia Health Promotion and Protection, 2009)

Need 3: Facilitation Skills in Experiential Education and Positive Youth Development

The results of the VRKC-based self-assessment suggest that volunteers desire education focused on facilitating compelling, relevant, educational experiences for youth. Respondents ranked "application of experiential learning" as one of the competencies they are most unsure

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of—not able to self-assess whether they or their county program need training in that topic. This uncertainty could mean that the majority of respondents were unfamiliar with the term.

However, respondents also ranked competencies related to experiential education as top subjects they want to know more about (i.e., use of multiple teaching strategies, incorporating community service-learning) and—as clearly evidenced in the open-ended responses—they are experiencing challenges in retaining new youth and engaging enrolled youth in project work, both of which could be symptoms of programming that is missing the mark.

In alignment with the study results and adult learning theory, volunteers should be provided opportunities, ideally with volunteer peer-educators, to

- build or expand upon their knowledge of positive youth development (e.g., empowering youth, motivating and encouraging youth, understanding developmental stages, youth-adult partnerships, youth-centered approaches)
- learn how to orient their program activities through the lens of positive youth development (e.g., discussion, roundtable or panel with experienced volunteers)
- gain hands-on experience with experiential education (e.g., experiential learning strategies, use of multiple teaching strategies, incorporating service-learning)

Need 4: Effective Program Administration, Communication, and Information Systems

Washington State 4-H volunteers are frustrated by the administration of the program, as 24% of the respondents reported being challenged by poor communication, support, and resource access from the 4-H office, a challenge also seen in other state 4-H programs (Arnold & Dolenc, 2008).

The high frequency of this challenge could be due to the high percentage of General Club Leaders who participated in the survey. While 4-H programming varies across states, club-based programming is arguably the most complex delivery model for volunteers and professionals, alike. The detailed policies and procedures which govern volunteer certification, youth safety, financial management, and other critical elements of club-based programming lead to increased reporting, paperwork, education, and support needs.

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This finding could also be related to the last 20 years of system-wide changes within Washington State University Extension that have affected the 4-H program's administrative capacity, including funding cuts and reorganization of the leadership structure (White & Teuteberg, 2015).

Extension personnel, such as 4-H professionals, are often challenged to balance the administrative and communication needs of program participants and their community in the midst of shifting workloads (Pellien & Lyons, 2017). Also, many 4-H professionals may not have the authority or capacity to significantly improve the systems in which they and the volunteers they support work. The results of this study highlight a need to better train volunteers on how best to navigate 4-H systems and processes, even the imperfect ones. Where authority and capacity to improve systems exist, efforts to do so must be prioritized.

In alignment with the study results and adult learning theory, volunteers should be provided experiential education, ideally with volunteer peer-educators, in

- completing any required or essential paperwork (e.g., club financial reporting)
- navigating online systems or sites (e.g., 4HOnline, reporting databases, 4-H websites)
- accessing online or in-office resource collections (e.g., curricula library)

Program professionals should also make strategic efforts, ideally working with volunteers within a shared-leadership team, to

- improve the clarity, consistency, timing, and accessibility of communication with program volunteers, youth, and families (e.g., effectively use communication apps and social media; Davis & Dishon, 2017; Freidig, 2019; Garcia et al., 2018)
- simplify requirements and paperwork whenever possible
- improve online access to relevant and practical resources

Limitations

- The survey used a modified version of the VRKC taxonomy, including removing, combining, or rewording competencies, and in one instance adding a competency.
- The competencies included within the VRKC taxonomy were not defined. Terms could have been interpreted differently amongst respondents and researchers.
- More survey participants responded to the first VRKC domain multiple-choice questions than the last, indicating possible survey fatigue.

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- The survey was collected only via email, which did not allow for those without email or computer access or skill an opportunity to contribute. There is a potential for the data set to be skewed towards middle-aged to young volunteers because of this; however, respondent age was not collected.

Implications for Future Research

The VRKC taxonomy proved a useful tool for assessing volunteer education and support needs. However, the researchers suggest (a) not relying on the taxonomy for needs assessments without asking open-ended questions about education and support needs as well, and (b) reviewing VRKC terms with study participants to check for understanding—modifying or explaining competencies as needed.

Avenues for Future Research

- Test the validity of study results (e.g., share study results with 4-H volunteers to validate and add details and nuance to the findings).
- Test the validity of self-assessment and perspectives of volunteers versus professionals using a survey of Washington State 4-H professionals or by facilitating a program observation study.
- Explore why the term or practice “application of experiential learning” was not well understood by Washington State 4-H volunteers.
- Study how 4-H volunteers interpret VRKC terms to improve future VRKC-based self-assessment research.
- Explore how best to teach and support the competencies volunteers identified as relevant.
- Explore the root causes (e.g., funding, staffing structures, staff workload) of the perceived poor administrative support volunteers reported.
- Further explore whether volunteers of other state 4-H programs report similarly themed needs—particularly those who volunteer within clubs.

Conclusion

The education and support systems program professionals provide volunteers—new and veteran—must be intentionally focused on volunteers’ evolving needs (Teuteberg & Cummins,

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2017). Continually improving volunteer education and support while providing experiences that ignite volunteers' motivations is crucial to the recruitment and retention of the volunteers 4-H relies on for success (Arnold et al., 2009; Van Horn et al., 1999). Overall, the results of this study indicate that 4-H professionals may improve education and support systems by focusing on four essential volunteer needs: (a) supportive teams, (b) engaged youth and families, (c) facilitation skills in experiential education and positive youth development, and (d) effective program administration, communication, and information systems. 4-H professionals should prioritize providing volunteers with education that is not only relevant and practical related to these themes, but that is also experiential and supported by networking, mentorships opportunities, and resource access. Fulfilling these four essential needs is necessary to support the volunteers who, in turn, support the youth to "learn by doing" and experience positive youth development outcomes.

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Appendix

VRKC Self-Assessment Results

Communication Skills VRKC Domain

	I would like to know more about this skill/subject.	I am confident in my abilities with this skill/subject.	Training in this skill/subject is needed to improve our county program.	I am not sure.	Total Response
Public speaking ¹	13%	69%	20%	10%	100%
	<i>n</i> = 45	<i>n</i> = 236	<i>n</i> = 68	<i>n</i> = 33	<i>n</i> = 340
Listening	11%	71%	21%	9%	100%
	<i>n</i> = 37	<i>n</i> = 241	<i>n</i> = 73	<i>n</i> = 31	<i>n</i> = 341
Non-verbal communication	17%	58%	22%	14%	100%
	<i>n</i> = 57	<i>n</i> = 196	<i>n</i> = 74	<i>n</i> = 46	<i>n</i> = 338
Teaching ²	22%	55%	32%	7%	100%
	<i>n</i> = 77	<i>n</i> = 190	<i>n</i> = 110	<i>n</i> = 23	<i>n</i> = 343
Marketing and public relations	26%	30%	38%	22%	100%
	<i>n</i> = 89	<i>n</i> = 102	<i>n</i> = 129	<i>n</i> = 75	<i>n</i> = 342
Use of technology for communication and education ³	28%	39%	38%	12%	100%
	<i>n</i> = 95	<i>n</i> = 135	<i>n</i> = 129	<i>n</i> = 41	<i>n</i> = 342

¹“Public speaking” was modified from “speaking” in the original VRKC taxonomy.

²“Teaching” was derived from “information delivery and dissemination” in the original VRKC taxonomy.

³“Use of technology for communication and education” was modified from “use of technology” in the original VRKC taxonomy.

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Organizational Skills VRKC Domain

	I would like to know more about this skill/subject.	I am confident in my abilities with this skill/subject.	Training in this skill/subject is needed to improve our county program.	I am not sure.	Total Response
Planning and organizing	21% <i>n</i> = 70	61% <i>n</i> = 205	28% <i>n</i> = 95	5% <i>n</i> = 18	100% <i>n</i> = 338
Time management	20% <i>n</i> = 66	64% <i>n</i> = 215	22% <i>n</i> = 74	6% <i>n</i> = 19	100% <i>n</i> = 338
Youth recruitment and involvement ⁴	24% <i>n</i> = 81	40% <i>n</i> = 136	37% <i>n</i> = 124	12% <i>n</i> = 42	100% <i>n</i> = 337
Parent recruitment and involvement	31% <i>n</i> = 105	33% <i>n</i> = 113	43% <i>n</i> = 147	8% <i>n</i> = 28	100% <i>n</i> = 339
Delegating tasks to parents	30% <i>n</i> = 101	43% <i>n</i> = 143	34% <i>n</i> = 113	8% <i>n</i> = 28	100% <i>n</i> = 335

⁴“Youth recruitment and involvement” was added to the competency list for this study and was not a part of the original VRKC taxonomy.

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4-H Program Management Skills VRKC Domain

	I would like to know more about this skill/subject.	I am confident in my abilities with this skill/subject.	Training in this skill/subject is needed to improve our county program.	I am not sure.	Total Response
Organization and structure of Extension	26% <i>n</i> = 85	43% <i>n</i> = 139	24% <i>n</i> = 79	19% <i>n</i> = 60	100% <i>n</i> = 324
Upholding the 4-H mission	15% <i>n</i> = 48	65% <i>n</i> = 209	23% <i>n</i> = 74	9% <i>n</i> = 30	100% <i>n</i> = 323
Risk management and risk reduction	22% <i>n</i> = 72	50% <i>n</i> = 163	25% <i>n</i> = 81	16% <i>n</i> = 52	100% <i>n</i> = 326
Liability awareness and reduction	26% <i>n</i> = 85	45% <i>n</i> = 148	27% <i>n</i> = 88	14% <i>n</i> = 47	100% <i>n</i> = 327
Club management	21% <i>n</i> = 70	57% <i>n</i> = 185	25% <i>n</i> = 83	11% <i>n</i> = 36	100% <i>n</i> = 326
Behavior management	24% <i>n</i> = 76	55% <i>n</i> = 179	26% <i>n</i> = 83	9% <i>n</i> = 30	100% <i>n</i> = 323
Record keeping	24% <i>n</i> = 79	52% <i>n</i> = 173	31% <i>n</i> = 101	9% <i>n</i> = 31	100% <i>n</i> = 330
Financial management	22% <i>n</i> = 71	54% <i>n</i> = 177	25% <i>n</i> = 83	14% <i>n</i> = 47	100% <i>n</i> = 326

Educational Design & Delivery Skills VRKC Domain

	I would like to know more about this skill/subject.	I am confident in my abilities with this skill/subject.	Training in this skill/subject is needed to improve our county program.	I am not sure.	Total Response
Use of age-appropriate activities	24% <i>n</i> = 77	64% <i>n</i> = 209	19% <i>n</i> = 62	5% <i>n</i> = 16	100% <i>n</i> = 327
Use of multiple teaching strategies	29% <i>n</i> = 94	52% <i>n</i> = 173	28% <i>n</i> = 94	6% <i>n</i> = 19	100% <i>n</i> = 330
Understanding differences in learning styles	23% <i>n</i> = 75	59% <i>n</i> = 196	31% <i>n</i> = 103	5% <i>n</i> = 16	100% <i>n</i> = 330
Subject matter knowledge	26% <i>n</i> = 86	56% <i>n</i> = 183	27% <i>n</i> = 87	5% <i>n</i> = 18	100% <i>n</i> = 328
Team-building skills	32% <i>n</i> = 103	46% <i>n</i> = 152	32% <i>n</i> = 104	8% <i>n</i> = 25	100% <i>n</i> = 327
Application of experiential learning	25% <i>n</i> = 81	49% <i>n</i> = 156	24% <i>n</i> = 76	17% <i>n</i> = 54	100% <i>n</i> = 320
Program evaluation methods	25% <i>n</i> = 81	41% <i>n</i> = 132	27% <i>n</i> = 88	20% <i>n</i> = 64	100% <i>n</i> = 323
Incorporating community service-learning ⁵	28% <i>n</i> = 93	43% <i>n</i> = 141	31% <i>n</i> = 100	14% <i>n</i> = 46	100% <i>n</i> = 327

⁵"Incorporating community service-learning" was modified from "service to the community" and was originally categorized in the Organization domain of the VRKC taxonomy.

The Right Tools at the Right Time

Positive Youth Development VRKC Domain

	I would like to know more about this skill/subject.	I am confident in my abilities with this skill/subject.	Training in this skill/subject is needed to improve our county program.	I am not sure.	Total Response
Developing life skills	22% <i>n</i> = 72	61% <i>n</i> = 201	25% <i>n</i> = 84	6% <i>n</i> = 20	100% <i>n</i> = 332
Leadership skills	24% <i>n</i> = 80	60% <i>n</i> = 198	29% <i>n</i> = 97	5% <i>n</i> = 16	100% <i>n</i> = 332
Understanding ages and stages of youth development	21% <i>n</i> = 69	57% <i>n</i> = 190	24% <i>n</i> = 81	8% <i>n</i> = 25	100% <i>n</i> = 331
Empowering youth ⁶	28% <i>n</i> = 92	50% <i>n</i> = 166	29% <i>n</i> = 95	8% <i>n</i> = 26	100% <i>n</i> = 330
Practicing youth—adult partnerships	27% <i>n</i> = 89	51% <i>n</i> = 167	27% <i>n</i> = 89	10% <i>n</i> = 33	100% <i>n</i> = 328
Motivating and encouraging youth ⁷	28% <i>n</i> = 94	55% <i>n</i> = 185	30% <i>n</i> = 101	5% <i>n</i> = 16	100% <i>n</i> = 335
Appreciating diversity	11% <i>n</i> = 37	68% <i>n</i> = 225	21% <i>n</i> = 69	10% <i>n</i> = 33	100% <i>n</i> = 329

⁶"Empowering youth" was modified from "empowerment of others" in the original VRKC taxonomy.

⁷"Motivating and encouraging youth" was modified from "ability to motivate and encourage youth" in the original VRKC taxonomy.

The Right Tools at the Right Time

Interpersonal Characteristics VRKC Domain

	I would like to know more about this skill/subject.	I am confident in my abilities with this skill/subject.	Training in this skill/subject is needed to improve our county program.	I am not sure.	Total Response
Demonstrating compassion and care	6% <i>n</i> = 20	81% <i>n</i> = 265	20% <i>n</i> = 65	5% <i>n</i> = 17	100% <i>n</i> = 329
Acceptance of others	6% <i>n</i> = 19	81% <i>n</i> = 270	20% <i>n</i> = 66	5% <i>n</i> = 16	100% <i>n</i> = 332
Honesty, ethics and morality	5% <i>n</i> = 18	81% <i>n</i> = 270	22% <i>n</i> = 74	5% <i>n</i> = 16	100% <i>n</i> = 334
Patience and flexibility	7% <i>n</i> = 25	77% <i>n</i> = 258	22% <i>n</i> = 73	4% <i>n</i> = 15	100% <i>n</i> = 334
Ability to develop and strengthen relationships	15% <i>n</i> = 49	68% <i>n</i> = 228	25% <i>n</i> = 85	6% <i>n</i> = 20	100% <i>n</i> = 334