

Florida 4-H Legislature

"It is so much fun. More fun, than I would think one could have while learning so much."

2004 Teen Participant

"I have learned more about my government than I ever could in a book."

2004 Teen Participant

"This has been the most rewarding activity I have ever done in my life. I have thought about politics as a career, but this furthered my interest."

2004 Teen Participant

Submitter's Contact Information

Name: Marilyn K. Lesmeister

Title: Volunteer Development and Civic Engagement

Affiliation: Oregon State University

Mailing Address: 105 Ballard Extension Hall, Corvallis, OR 97331-3608

E-Mail Address: marilyn.lesmeister@oregonstate.edu

Telephone Number: 541-737-2794

Fax Number: 541-737-1332

Name: Vickie Mullins

Title: 4-H Agent

Affiliation: Santa Rosa County, University of Florida

Mailing Address: 6263 Dogwood Drive, Milton, FL 32570-3500

E-Mail Address: vickiem@co.santa-rosa.fl.us

Telephone Number: 850-623-3868

Fax Number: 850-623-6151

Name: Debbie Nistler

Title: 4-H Agent

Affiliation: Duval County, University of Florida

Mailing Address: 1010 N. McDuff Ave., Jacksonville, FL 32254-2031

E-Mail Address: nistlerd@ifas.ufl.edu

Telephone Number: 904-387-8850

Fax Number: 904-387-8902

Name: Michael Wickersheim

Title: 4-H Volunteer

Affiliation: University of Florida Extension

Mailing Address: Flagstaff, AZ

E-Mail Address: wickie518@npgcable.com

Telephone Number: 928-600-7261

Program of Distinction Category

- Youth in Governance
- Youth in Organizational Governance
- Youth in Decision-Making
- Youth/Adult Partnerships
- Youth Action
- Leadership, Citizenship and Life Skills
- Leadership Development

Sources of Funding that Support this Program

Participant fees are \$210 per person (including program materials; lodging; and meals, except lunches). The Florida 4-H Foundation contributes \$500 annually. Private donations from event alumni are approximately \$1,000. County 4-H Foundations in approximately 50 of 67 counties offer full or partial scholarships for 4-H'ers to attend.

Program Content

Knowledge and Research Base

Competencies from two PRKC domains, partnerships and volunteerism, guide the success of this educational program. The first domain, partnership, is fundamental to the *Florida 4-H Legislature* program. The opportunity to plan and learn together is a critical key to youth/adult partnerships (Camino, 2000). The nature of this educational program is unfamiliar to most adults and youth. Legislative protocol and political networks are intimidating to many. This program enables youth and adults to learn and grow together. Research conducted by Kouzes and Posner (1995) found that leaders get extraordinary things done when they can experiment, take risks and learn from resulting mistakes. This program promotes learning and youth leadership in a safe environment. "Involving young people in decisions that affected their lives and their communities may provide them with opportunities to: build a sense of belonging and connection to their communities; create civic awareness and action; and, experience a sense of mastery" (Zeldin et al., p. 45).

The second domain, volunteerism, is also key to the *Florida 4-H Legislature* program. Volunteerism and civic engagement work hand in hand for youth and adults learning and taking action to influence public policy. This program supports learning that includes "...knowledge of government structures and functions; attitudes toward proper political behavior; and behavior itself, such as voting, commitment to society, and of late, a host of actions that comprise participation in civil society" (Youniss et al., p. 124). Young people often have a fresh perspective, a willingness to question organizational norms and structures, and an appreciation for integrating discussion with practice. "Civic engagement for young people is a desirable activity that will strengthen our society and prepare youth to be good citizens in the future...(who are) ethical, skilled, highly committed young leaders willing to take on all levels of local and national responsibility for building the best possible society" (Stoneman, p. 222).

"It is truly a learning experience and it made me want to get involved and vote."
2004 Teen Participant

The experiential learning model guides the planning and implementation of this program at all levels. As Dewey (1938) advocated, "Development and learning are best achieved through a dynamic interaction of knowledge and skills, on one hand, and experience, on the other." Through the *Florida 4-H Legislature* youth have gained confidence and experienced the satisfaction of civic engagement.

*"Youth are capable (and) considerate.
(They) can accomplish so much with the right adult guidance."*
2005 Adult Participant

Needs Assessment

The program was initiated by Herbert Morgan, a state legislator and former Florida 4-H (teen) Council officer, when he noted that "Boy's State" was the only opportunity young people had to learn the process of state government. Girls had no structured opportunity to learn about government. Representative Morgan also observed that few young adults were involved in public decision-making, especially those who were ages 21 – 30. Morgan observed a need and took steps to prepare teens for roles in public policy decision-making for the time when they could be elected or appointed.

Today, informal interviews with adults and youth at the State (teen) Council, county staff and state faculty, confirmed that the Florida 4-H program needs an overall plan for youth leadership development for civic engagement. They state that the *Florida 4-H Legislature* is one state program that provides experiential learning in youth/adult partnerships, and in making decisions for civic engagement.

Goals and Objectives

Florida youth work in cooperation with adults to learn leadership skills to apply as active, responsible citizens for civic engagement. Specifically, the *Florida 4-H Legislature* program helps participants learn:

- a) To work in youth/adult partnerships.
- b) Skills for being contributing citizens in communities.
- c) Leadership skills within governmental structures.
- d) Parliamentary procedure, networking, and structures of public decision-making.
- e) To apply logic and identify potential solutions within the context of issues.
- f) To consider and respect varying viewpoints.
- g) Volunteer and career opportunities in public policy.

Target Audience

Program activities are appropriate for youth ages 14 to 18. Limited space in the capitol facilities, and ongoing program preparation, preclude the program from expanding registration beyond 4-H participants at this time. Some youth attend often and experience a different role in the *Florida 4-H*

Legislature each year. One Taylor County teen joined 4-H, specifically to learn and grow in this program.

"People our age do care about the legislative process."
2004 Teen Participant

Youth and families learn about the *Florida 4-H Legislature* via county newsletters, local and state workshop, weekly electronic news to staff and volunteers, success stories on the website, and peer to peer sharing.

The diversity of the audience is comparable to the overall Florida 4-H enrollment. The youth/adult planning committee includes representatives from Florida's Asian, African-American and Hispanic populations. Individuals selected annually for youth leadership roles (Senate President, Speaker of the House, Party Leaders, etc.) purposefully represent the diversity of the state program.

Program Design and Content

Type of program

The *Florida 4-H Legislature* is a state educational program that is a one-week simulation of the state legislature. Participants attend Monday afternoon through Friday morning, the last week of June. It is planned by a youth/adult partnership and implemented as a youth-led learning event. Participants study the responsibilities of a pre-assigned role, then function in that role and use creative problem-solving skills within the structure of the state legislative process.

"There is not (another) event like Florida 4-H Legislature that gives a student such a real life, practical experience on citizenship. It inspires future involvement, critical thinking and debate."
2004 Adult Participant

Methods used to deliver the program

Each September, teens and adult advisors begin planning the *Florida 4-H Legislature*. Nine months before the event, all Florida 4-H youth are invited to propose 4-H legislation. The planning committee accepts, revises, and drafts a total of 10 pieces of legislation for each of six 4-H legislative committees: (1) Agriculture, (2) Criminal and Juvenile Justice, (3) Education, (4) Government, Commerce and Transportation, (5) Health & Human Services, and (6) Homeland Security. Examples of 4-H legislation include protecting water supplies, expanding opportunities for genetic research, adopting "sporks" for school cafeterias in lieu of forks and spoons, mandating theater arts training for juvenile offenders, and requiring school districts to accept 4-H activities as an excused absence. A youth/adult subcommittee edits bills to ensure that bills are debatable, a positive learning experience, and able to withstand media scrutiny. Proposed 4-H legislation and other resources are available for youth to study at the website, <http://4h.ifas.ufl.edu/events/index.htm>, and printed for use during the event.

Six months before the *Florida 4-H Legislature*, individuals and club members begin to research aspects of the proposed legislation, discover facts, practice parliamentary procedure and develop debate strategies. These skills are needed to

introduce a bill, lobby, respond to questions, amend proposed legislation, and make policy.

Six weeks before the *Florida 4-H Legislature*, each youth is assigned a role from three preferences he/she has identified on the registration form. Youth prepare for their specific assigned responsibilities. The library, public officials, Extension staff, media and the internet are sources of information.

During the event orientation participants review their roles through conversation with lobbyists and legislators. At the opening session in the House Chambers, Florida's Lt. Governor conducts the installation of all 4-H legislature officials. During the week, 4-H'ers experience one or more roles such as: senator, representative, legislative page, lobbyist, reporter, committee chair/vice chair, green or gold party leader, majority or minority party whip, Senate or House leadership position, supreme court judge, defense or prosecuting lawyer, juror, aide to a legislator, or governor. Each of the 60 4-H bills is passed or defeated during a committee meeting or in legislative chambers during the *Florida 4-H Legislature*.

The *Florida 4-H Legislature* committee convenes each day during the program week to discuss successes, challenges, and recommendations. The youth committee members make decisions that affect others daily. Along with adults, they are accountable for program success.

*"I am leaving this event excited
about participating in as many political opportunities that I can."
2004 Teen Participant*

At the close of the annual program, participants reflect on ways to use these skills in local organizations and community government. County faculty are partners in finding opportunities for participants to serve on local boards and committees. Participants are more likely to attend city council and county government meetings. Recently, Florida youth visited legislators to discuss the University Extension budget.

*"Our 4-H members are able to learn the legislative process in great detail,
and will remember this experience for a lifetime
because they came voluntarily and took their roles seriously."
2004 Adult Participant*

Curricula and/or educational materials

Manual I instructs youth in legislative decorum and provides in-depth scripts for learning language appropriate to use while lobbying, and participating in committee meetings and legislative sessions. Manual II includes all 60 pieces of proposed legislation to be studied and considered during the legislative experience. All 4-H youth are invited to submit proposed legislation to be considered as one of 60 bills to publish in Manual II, for use during the program. Manual II also identifies two or more lobby group positions for each bill.

While a number of counties schedule local workshops to practice parliamentary procedure, all participants are encouraged to use educational materials for self-study. They use libraries, Internet sources, media, and interviews with public officials to expand their learning prior to the week-long *Florida 4-H Legislature* experience.

Official state voter registration applications, committee calendar schedules, and other forms have been replicated to simulate the legislative experience as accurately as possible during the *Florida 4-H Legislature*.

Partnerships or collaborations

- A youth/adult planning committee includes 24 teens and four adult advisors.
- County staff and volunteers are mentors in the ongoing county learning process. They take an active role in advising and supporting specific youth groups during the week-long program.
- The University of Florida 4-H Public Relations staff provides a media release to every participant's county newspaper, radio and television stations. Photographs are submitted to newspapers during the event. The Governor's office provides an opportunity for photographs that the Press Corp distributes.
- The League of Women Voters lead local workshops and provide resources to help participants prepare for the legislative experience.
- State government employees at the capitol are key partners to schedule facilities and provide access to valuable learning resources, such as the electronic voting technology and capitol research library.
- State legislators and lobbyists attend the program orientation and committee meetings to inform and guide learning.
- The Supreme Court and District Court staff provide tours and educational programs during the week. Court officials at all levels take time to address program participants and encourage involvement in their local communities.
- Program alumni propose 4-H legislation, edit bills, and mentor youth in leadership roles.
- The State 4-H Foundation, Inc. identifies sponsors who support youth in governance programs exclusively.

A new level of adult recognition was initiated during the 2005 *Florida 4-H Legislature*. One "Outstanding Volunteer" is named from the current participants, and one or more partners is honored as a "Friend of the Florida 4-H Legislature" annually.

Program Evaluation

Process

Each year all participants complete an evaluation that guides the youth/adult committee planning process for the next annual program. Educational materials are revised and improved each year to incorporate participant recommendations.

A variety of evaluation data has been collected annually. At the close of the 2004 program, participants responded to open-ended questions about things they learned, what they would tell legislators about this program, and how the experience could be improved in the future. They also responded to nine skill statements on a post/pre-test instrument.

Outcomes and Impacts

Stoneman (p. 222) states that young people learn leadership through organizational governance and issue-based advocacy, which occurs through the *Florida 4-H Legislature*. This program promotes “understanding how government functions, and the acquisition of behaviors that allow citizens to participate...” (Youniss et al, 124). There are 260 total seats available in the two Florida legislative chambers. Two hundred and twenty youth participated in 2004, 230 participated in 2005, and 240 participated in 2006. Approximately a third of the participants are “first-timers” each year. Two-thirds of the participants return for ongoing learning and leadership roles.

In 2004, participants said they gained understanding and learned skills. They developed confidence in public speaking, logical thinking, critical thinking, expressing self, legislative processes, parliamentary procedure, debate, and negotiation. At the close of the *Florida 4-H Legislature*, more than 52 % of all participants ranked themselves as having “Improved” or “Greatly Improved” in all eight skills. While adult scores were not included in the final data analysis, there was evidence that adults had a positive learning experience as well.

Youth participants reported the highest level of learning and skill development in three areas: (a) debate, (b) parliamentary procedure, and (c) legislative processes. While 73% of youth reported that they possessed “Good” or “Great” debate skills before the mock legislative program, more than 47% said they “Improved,” and over 16% “Greatly Improved” their debate skills. Almost 44% of participants reported that they “Improved,” and over 32% “Greatly Improved” their skills in parliamentary procedure. More than 40% of participants said they “Improved,” and 36.5% “Greatly Improved” their understanding of legislative processes.

Table 1: Growth in 8 Life Skills

	% Greatly Improved	% Improved
Critical thinking		
Debate skills	16.2 %	47.8 %
Expressing self		
Logical thinking		
Parliamentary procedure	32.7 %	43.5 %
Public speaking		
Negotiation		
Understand legislative process	36.5 %	42 %

“It is a great way for us to learn about the government, debate, leadership and working with others.”
2004 Youth Participant

“I learned to appreciate the hard and frustrating work involved in making laws. I really honor the great amount of effort our government (officials) put in.”
2004 Teen Participant

"I learned more about state government at (the) Florida 4H Legislature than I did all my years in both high school and college."
2004 Adult Participant

Communication to stakeholders

The planning committee receives evaluation summaries annually and uses the information to make decisions for program planning, material development and revision, and implementation strategies. The State 4-H Foundation receives a report regarding the outcomes of the program. The Foundation reports to specific stakeholders and potential sponsors. Information and photographs are posted on the website for teens, volunteers, and faculty. While the website is currently being updated and improved, it is a key element in informing and recruiting participants.

Program Sustainability

This program has been sustained for 34 years because of the partnership between teen participants, adult volunteers and Extension staff who have made-the-best-better annually. Each partner group and collaborator contributes time and expertise, before and during the program. It has operated with participant fees with occasional contributions available to enhance the program.

Participation has grown consistently for three decades. It began as an experience in the House of Representatives. Then, lobbyist roles were added to simulate citizen influence on the decision-making process. A learning track in the judicial branch of government was added later to provide active learning for the lobbyists while 4-H representatives were active in the Chambers. After 2000, the experience was expanded to a bi-cameral legislature and the role of 4-H Governor became an appointed leadership role. Recently the planning committee added a Lt. Governor role to be consistent with Florida state government.

The program is sustainable because teens are committed to its success. Youth draft 60 legislative bills for consideration during the event, make recommendations to improve resources each year, select well-qualified teen leaders, provide all leadership roles during the event, and mentor their peers. A core group of adult volunteers and staff support the process by providing learning opportunities all year, challenging the planning committee, providing communication links, keeping consistent and formal contact with government officials, and coaching teen leaders. Public decision-makers mentor and provide support to help participants learn legislative structures and procedures.

A key to the success of the *Florida 4-H Legislature* is the accumulated knowledge teens bring to the planning committee and leaderships roles. Due to the powerful experience the *Florida 4-H Legislature* program provides, each partner is committed to the others for developing and implementing this educational program. Teens recruit teens to participate. County staff support the educational preparation and offer financial support for youth to attend.

This program is providing a "new pathway for youth civic engagement by involving young people in organizational decision making...(It) create(s) strong, caring relationships between young people and adults....(and it is) seeking to ensure meaningful involvement of young people in all aspects of their structures and programs" (Camino & Zeldin, p. 216). The ongoing success of this program is due to the infusion of youth partners in all aspects of this program. The culture and history of this program is impacting the larger Florida 4-H organization. It is

planned through a successful youth/adult partnership and it is conducted as an effective youth-led event.

Replication

While this state program has grown and evolved during the past 34 years, it began much smaller. To initiate a similar program, begin with only one branch of state government and/or only one aspect of the legislative branch. It could be helpful to limit the number of participants during the first year. Next, find resource people (legislators and lobbyists) who can guide and mentor the planning committee. Public policy makers provide a valuable network to suggest program options and maximize program potential. It is also important to gather resource materials that are specific to legislation in your state. Finally, obtain information about policies, structures, and procedures for the purpose of duplicating them in the 4-H experience.

The following are keys to success:

- ❑ Establish a committee of 10 - 15 youth and four adults.
- ❑ Hold the event in the state capitol or similarly prestigious environment.
- ❑ Develop one aspect of the program effectively, before expanding it.
- ❑ Add program aspects (e.g., Supreme Court) as the number of participants grow, in order to keep the program interactive for every youth at every experience level.
- ❑ Recruit a dedicated planning committee from experienced participants, once the program is established.

It is important for adult advisors and coaches to remain flexible. Adults must choose appropriate methods to work with youth and their varied skill levels each year. Adult partners provide communication links among committee members, establish governmental networks, develop print resources, and make facility arrangements. In research conducted by Camino (2000), she confirms that, "Successful partnerships tended to have flexible roles for both youth and adults, high tolerance for differences, and appropriate responses to developmental challenges...One of the most strenuous skills for adult to take on and actualize was coaching – providing legitimate opportunities for youth to take on meaningful roles in the partnership while also holding them accountable" (p. 15).

Rationale and Importance of Program

The purpose of the *Florida 4-H Legislature* is to provide an experiential learning opportunity for 4-H teens in the theory and practice of determining public policy through state government. The power of the experience in the *Florida 4-H Legislature* is in the strong, fundamental youth/adult partnership in the planning process. It is unique and has strong impact because the program is youth-led. Youth own this program. They accept their volunteer role to plan, implement, and improve it each year. "Once young people learn through organizational governance and issue-based advocacy how policy decisions are made, they become interested in sustaining an influential role" (Stoneman, p. 222).

References

- Camino, L.A. (2000). Youth-adult partnerships: Entering new territory in community work and research. *Applied Developmental Science, 4*(1), 11-20.
- Camino, L. & Zeldin, S. (2002). From periphery to center: Pathways for youth civic engagement in the day-to-day life of communities. *Applied Developmental Science, 6*(4), 213-220.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Democracy and education*. New York: Collier.
- Kouzes, J. & Posner, B. (1995). *The leadership challenge: How to keep getting extraordinary things done in organizations*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Scheve, J. A., Perkins, D., Mincemoyer, C. C., & Welsh, J. A. (2006). *Say y.e.s. to youth: Youth engagement strategies*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University.
- Stoneman, D. (2002). The role of youth programming in the development of civic engagement. *Applied Developmental Science, 6*(4), 221-226.
- Youniss, J., Bales, S., Christmas-Best, V., Diversi, M., & Silbereisen, R. (2002). Youth civic engagement in the twenty-first century. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 12*(1), 121-148.
- Zeldin, S., McDaniel, A. K., Topitzes, D., & Calvert, M. (2000). *Youth in decision-making: A study on impacts of youth on adults and organizations*. Commissioned by the Innovation Center of Community and Youth Development-Division of Nation 4-H Council. University of Wisconsin-Madison: Department of Human Development and Family Studies.