

Engaging Volunteers in Professional Development

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Everyone knows that 4-H helps youth develop a practice of lifelong learning and that 4-H volunteers are role models for this important life skill. We wondered how 4-H volunteers prepare for their roles, and where and how they find information to continue their own learning.

The University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources, Developing Volunteer Capacities Workgroup (DVC WG) embarked on a project to conduct a needs assessment that asked volunteers to report on their history and needs of professional development using ONLINE platforms, and asked where volunteers receive pertinent information. Our team sent out survey invitations through 4-H online to all the currently registered volunteers and over 30% responded.

Volunteers let us know that training they received from 4-H is what helped them prepare to be a volunteer (41%). In addition, volunteers said their employment experience and experience as a youth 4-Her helped prepare them for their current volunteer role. This is interesting because one of the things it tells us is that while 4-H volunteers come from many backgrounds, they use their experiences to engage youth.

We asked what online and in person opportunities volunteers had previously taken or would like to attend. Results for in person and online were the same for courses they would like to attend. Subject Matter, Educational Methods, and Youth Development were the top three desired opportunities regardless of in person or online. In addition, it seems the respondents answered the same for in person or online for trainings they have previously attended; orientation, project leader training and club leader trainings.

Consistent with volunteers stating they want training in subject matter, over 60% of volunteers reported “self-developed” when asked where they get their information on subject matter. They also reported they “self-develop” Educational Methodology (41%) and Youth Development (35%). Volunteers also reach out to other 4-H volunteers for things like subject matter (48%), club management information (43%), and 4-H policy (26%). For things like 4-H policy though, a majority reach out to 4-H staff (61%).

UC 4-H is committed to helping volunteers connect to resources and opportunities that helps them continue their own learning and thereby model these skills for youth. Opportunities include State Leaders’ Forum, State Leaders’ Conference, and the upcoming Western Region Leaders’ Forum, to be hosted by California in San Diego, March 1-4, 2018. Local trainings vary by county and may include club and project leader planning, youth development and experiential learning to name a few. A new orientation, positive youth development framework, intercultural competency and child protection, community club leader essentials and chaperone orientation courses are being rolled out in 2017-18.

When 4-H volunteers engage in their own professional development, 4-Hers recognize and understand the importance and role of learning across the lifespan.