HERE TODAY, GONE TOMORROW: AN INVESTIGATION INTO WHY OLDER YOUTH LEAVE THE 4-H PROGRAM

DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

For years, 4-H has struggled with the complex problems of membership retention, especially among older youth. However, little research has been done concerning why 4-H members choose to leave the program. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the retention of older 4-H youth. Specifically, the study sought to investigate the reasons older youth choose not to re-enroll in the Erie County 4-H program. Specific objectives of the study were to: (a) explore the reasons why youth chose not to re-enroll in the Erie County 4-H Youth Development program, (b) identify the barriers to participation in the 4-H program for Erie County youth, and (c) determine what conditions would facilitate participation in the Erie County 4-H program.

The study was grounded in two specific theoretical frameworks. First, from the perspective of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Theory, the environment in which youth development occurs is viewed as a set of nested contexts ranging from families and peer groups to the culture and government; the theory proposes a series of hypotheses about how these contexts or systems interact. In the current study, the focus was on the way in which factors in the different environments impacted a youth’s 4-H experience and hence their decision not to re-enroll in the Erie County 4-H program.
The second theoretical framework was Csikszentmihalyi’s Theory of Flow which contends that when individuals experience meaningful challenges that are matched to their skills, they experience sustained enjoyment or “flow” which is repeated each time they participate in the activity. Therefore, according to this theory, if youth do not feel challenged through their 4-H experience, they will not wish to repeat the experience and will likely choose to discontinue their involvement with the program.

To address the research questions, a qualitative study was designed to explore factors related to youth discontinuing their involvement with the Erie County 4-H program. Sixteen youth participated in one of three focus groups held to gather data to answer the research questions. Focus group participants consisted of Erie County youth who were ages 11 to 17 during the 2007 4-H program year who were enrolled in 4-H in an Erie County community 4-H club in 2007, but who did not re-enroll in a community 4-H club in 2008. The study did not include 4-H members enrolled only in 4-H through their involvement in 4-H school enrichment or special emphasis programs as of the same dates.

Erie County’s 4-H member database was used to obtain a listing of the names, addresses, and phone numbers of youth ages 12 to 18 in 2008 who were members of Erie County 4-H in 2007, but who did not re-enroll for 2008. From this list, individuals were
contacted through their parent or guardian by the researcher and invited to participate in one of three focus group interviews for the purpose of investigating the reasons older youth do no re-enroll in the Erie County 4-H program.

Significant findings from the study concerning the retention of older 4-H youth related to: (a) experiences with advisors, (b) experiences with competition, and (c) conflicts with other activities. While some youth discussed positive relationships with their club advisors, many youth discussed inappropriate behavior exhibited by adults and parents, uninvolved and unsupportive advisors, as well as advisors who were overly involved. The findings of the study clearly revealed that the relationship between a club advisor and a member had an influence on a youth’s satisfaction with their club, and their satisfaction with the 4-H program as a whole, and hence their decision not to re-enroll.

Negative judging experiences was also established as a theme across research questions. While some participants described positive experiences with competition, many youth described perceived favoritism during judging, unclear expectations for judgings, problems with organization during judging, and poor sportsmanship exhibited during competition.

Participation in other activities was also a theme found across research questions. Several participants said that 4-H was time consuming and interfered with other activities in which they were involved.
Finally, in terms of conditions that facilitate participation, many youth discussed family members as being influential in their decision to join the 4-H program, so family members would likely also be influential in a young person’s decision to re-enroll in the program. The involvement of friends also appeared to facilitate continued participation, as youth were more likely to re-enroll in the program if their friends were also active in the program.
Dedicated to my husband

For taking this journey with me

And to my parents

For teaching me the value of an education
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Thank you to my husband, Joel, who I met early in the journey toward this degree, and who has stood beside me and encouraged me through the years it has taken to get to this point. Thank you for the sacrifices you made so that I could pursue this dream.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

4-H Youth Development began in Clark County, Ohio. On January 15, 1902, Mr. Albert Belmont Graham, the superintendent of the Springfield Township Schools at that time, organized a meeting with some thirty boys and girls in the county courthouse basement. The intent behind the meeting was to learn more about harvesting corn, planting a garden, testing soil samples, tying knots in rope, and identifying natural wildlife such as weeds and insects. Eventually, the group came to be called the "Boy's and Girl's Agricultural Club." By 1905, there were over 2,000 youth within 16 counties partaking in similar programs to that of the "original" Agricultural Club. In 1916, fourteen years after the first courthouse meeting, the Ohio 4-H organization officially began with the establishment of the Department of Boy's and Girl's Club Work (Deel, 2002; Wessel & Wessel, 1982).

4-H membership is open to all youth between the ages of five and nineteen. Members are welcome regardless of cultural, economic, and social backgrounds. Even with the many changes in society today, Graham's basic aim for 4-H remains the same: the development of youth as individuals and as responsible, productive members of the community in which they live.
Since 1914, when membership was recorded at 116,262, 4-H has experienced tremendous growth in the United States. 4-H membership peaked in 1974 at 7.5 million. In 1994, 4-H enrollment listed 5.6 million members, a drop of almost 2 million (Van Horn, Flannagan, & Thomson, 1999). In 1975, 32.2 percent of 4-H members came from farms, 40.1 percent from rural nonfarm, and 36.7 percent from towns and cities of over 10,000 population. While in 1994, 13 percent of the members came from farms, 37 percent from rural nonfarm areas, and 50 percent from towns and cities of over 10,000 population (Annual 4-H Youth Development Enrollment, 1994).

Today, 4-H is alive and well in all fifty states, the territories, and military installations across the world. 4-H is no longer only for members of the farming community, but extends into the suburbs and inner cities all over America. In 2006, 45 percent of youth reached by 4-H were from rural areas and small towns while 55 percent were from the suburbs and large inner cities (Kress, 2006). These figures reflect the drastic decline in the number of family-owned farms during the same period (Van Horn, Flannagan, & Thomson, 1999), as well as the 4-H program’s intentional efforts to develop non-traditional programming to attract youth from suburban and urban areas. While the Ohio 4-H program uses a variety of delivery methods to help youth develop life skills, 4-H club work is still the core of the Ohio 4-H program and 4-H programs across the country (Deel, 2002; Wessel & Wesssel, 1982).

While youth development programs such as 4-H are designed to develop skills, competencies, and knowledge, they also aim to prevent problem behaviors by reducing risk and risk related factors. According to Anderson-Butcher (2005) examination of the outcomes of quality youth development programs reveals that participation in programs
such as 4-H is associated with enhanced academic achievement, school attendance and school engagement, less substance use and delinquency, enhanced social competence, and improved mental health. Therefore, it is clear that youth development programs are important contributors to healthy youth development and positive outcomes, especially during adolescence. However, ensuring participation in these programs is a continual challenge.

Retention of youth participants has been an issue for youth development programs, and participation tends to decline as youth age. Youth programs that serve a wide age range of youth, such as 4-H, often have an age distribution of enrollees that reflects greater numbers of youth participating through early elementary school and into the middle school years, with a distinct decline in enrollment numbers thereafter. As a result, youth development professionals have expressed concern that young people enrolled in youth programs tend to drop out beginning in early adolescence (Russell & Heck, 2008).

Studies about 4-H retention have been limited and those that have been conducted have varied greatly in their methodology and in who has been included as participants. However, there has not been a study that has engaged youth who have chosen not to be involved in the program in a discussion concerning why they chose to discontinue their enrollment.

Clearly, youth will not experience the benefits that youth development programs, such as 4-H, are known to create if they do not continue participation in programming (Anderson-Butcher, 2005). Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that the overall success of 4-H youth development programming depends, at least in part, on the ability
of the program to retain its members. But the question remains, why are youth leaving the 4-H program in early adolescence?

Problem Statement

For years, 4-H has struggled with the complex problems of membership retention, especially among older youth. However, little research has been done concerning why 4-H members choose to leave the program. Therefore, the research questions proposed below seem necessary to further investigate the retention of older 4-H youth.

Research Questions

The following questions were the focus for this study:

1. Why do older youth choose not to re-enroll in the Erie County 4-H Youth Development program?
2. What are the barriers to participation in the 4-H program for Erie County youth?
3. What conditions would facilitate participation in the Erie County 4-H program?

Definitions

The following definitions were used in this study:

4-H is Extension’s youth development program. 4-H is a learning laboratory where youth, with the assistance of caring adults, explore the world and develop the life skills necessary for a successful transition from childhood into adulthood (Astroth, 2003).

4-H clubs are entities that are youth centered and adult guided, have organizational support, and whose goal is to create a climate where young people can
develop in healthy ways as they learn and practice the roles and responsibilities associated with active membership in society (Walker, Dunham, & Snyder, 1998).

4-H club members are youth who at least 8 years old and in the third grade as of the current year who are enrolled in 4-H club through Ohio State University Extension’s 4-H Youth Development program. 4-H membership ends December 31 of the year in which the member turns 19 years of age. Members are permitted to join the Ohio 4-H Cloverbud program when they are at least five years old and in Kindergarten as of January 1 of the current year.

4-H advisor is an adult who volunteers his or her time to organize 4-H club work, who helps 4-H members choose projects, and who assists members with preparations for judgings. All club advisors and volunteers must be approved through Ohio State University Extension’s volunteer selection process before beginning volunteer work.

4-H retention is keeping a youth active in the 4-H youth development program.

4-H judging is the process by which 4-H project work is evaluated. Most 4-H project judgings consist of an interview with a knowledgeable project judge. The 4-H members are evaluated based on their skills and knowledge as well as the product produced.

Assumptions

It was assumed in this study that:

1. Youth participate in the 4-H program voluntarily.
2. 4-H members experience varied motivations for joining and continued participation.
3. Youth discontinue their participation in 4-H for a variety of reasons and are able to articulate these reasons.

4. The respondents answered all questions honestly and did not hold back important information.

5. 4-H is experienced differently by different individuals based on individual, social, and environmental factors.

Limitations

Limitations of the study included:

1. The sample was limited to Erie County 4-H youth and therefore is not generalizable to other counties or to 4-H youth in general.

2. The study design did not allow youth to participate who could not attend one of the scheduled focus group sessions. It did not allow those to participate who had prior commitments on the evenings the focus groups were held or those whose parents would not allow them to participate.

3. The research method was useful in gaining depth of the subject, but not breadth.

Significance of the Study

The Battelle study of Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio 4-H program published in 2005 concluded that the education and values instilled by 4-H in the majority of participating youth are those that are important to individual development and to providing valued and productive members of Ohio society and Ohio’s economy.
However, this desired education and instillation of values cannot occur if youth do not remain active participants in 4-H programming.

While studies have been conducted on the retention of 4-H members, it has not been a widely studied topic. This is likely due, at least in part, to the challenges involved in asking youth who have chosen not to be involved in a program, to discuss their participation in said program. While non-participants are not often studied, who better to ask about the retention of 4-H youth than former 4-H members? Therefore, with the limited research conducted on the retention of older 4-H youth, this study seems necessary to further investigate the reasons why youth chose not to re-enroll in the Erie County 4-H program.

The results of this study will be used to help 4-H professionals understand why 4-H members chose to leave 4-H programs. The results can then be used by 4-H Extension Educators to develop strategies and practices that will aid in retaining older 4-H members and help 4-H club members have positive experiences within the 4-H program.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

4-H Youth Development programs provide an intentional process that promotes positive outcomes by providing opportunities, relationships, and support for youth. These programs help youth acquire the life skills necessary to meet the challenges of transition from childhood to adolescence and into adulthood. 4-H Youth Development uses experiential, research-based educational programs to help youth become competent, caring, confident, connected, and contributing citizens (Astroth, 2003). However, the phrase “here today, gone tomorrow” describes 4-H membership in many counties across the country. For years, 4-H has struggled with the complex problems of membership retention, especially among older youth.

Chapter 2 begins with a discussion of changes that occur during adolescent development. The chapter then proceeds to a discussion of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Theory of Human Development and Csikszentmihalyi’s Theory of Flow, along with examples of how retention of 4-H youth fit within these theories. In addition, an overview of studies that have investigated the retention of 4-H youth is presented, along with a discussion of research focusing on how participation in 4-H clubs influences youth.
Adolescent Development

Adolescence is the critical time period between childhood and adulthood where many developmental changes occur (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Adolescents experience new or strengthened motives, such as sexual desire and the desire to fit into a peer group, that compete with and distract them from the project of development (Larson, 2006). Cognitive changes in adolescence include the increased ability to think abstractly, to consider hypothetical and real situations, to consider multiple dimensions of a problem at once, and to reflect on oneself and on complicated problems. Social development is another change that occurs during adolescence. The focus changes to peer-related social, sports, and other extracurricular activities. Activities with peers, peer acceptance, and appearance may take precedence over school academic activities (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

The adolescent time period is a time when young people need to develop the attitudes, competencies, values, and social skills that will help them be successful adults. Adolescence is also a time to avoid another course of development, such as delinquent behavior, that may limit their future potential (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). So, while adolescence brings new obstacles to development, it also brings the potential for youth to develop a more advanced level of self-regulation, initiative, and agency (Larson, 2006).

Community programs can provide a safe place for adolescents to explore themselves and their interests with diverse activities and people. However, an article by Heinsohn and Lewis (1995) discussed the idea that youth development professionals and volunteers should view participants leaving youth development programs as part of a normal, healthy developmental process, rather than a programming glitch. Teens have a
wide variety of activities to choose from, and adolescence is a time for exploring and experimenting with new interests or refining and expanding ongoing activities or interests. Adolescence is also when individuals develop independence from their family, and choosing one’s own activities and dropping activities pursued since childhood are ways to do so. According to Heinsohn and Lewis (1995), youth organizations need to adjust their expectations for teen participation and remember that teens participate voluntarily. Therefore, youth organizations that are flexible and willing to make program changes to reflect changing teen interests will attract and retain participants.

Understanding what is needed by adolescents to successfully navigate the adolescent time period is important for people who work with adolescent youth (Eccles & Gootman, 2002) and critical to understanding the issues and challenges concerning retention of 4-H youth.

**Theoretical Framework**

*Description of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Model*

Urie Bronfenbrenner’s ecological perspective provides a solid theoretical grounding for a range of youth development principles, in particular, the importance of engagement in challenging activities and supportive relationships, both of which endure and change over time. Bronfenbrenner suggests that development is generally promoted by engagement in activities that are regular and enduring and that are challenging in the sense of increasing complexity. Bronfenbrenner views the environment in which development occurs as a set of nested contexts ranging from families and peer groups to
the culture and government, and proposes a series of hypotheses about how these contexts or systems interact (Hamilton, Hamilton, & Pittman, 2004).

The ecological theory consists of five systems: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem, and the chronosystem. The *microsystem* is described as the setting where an individual lives. Beyond simply the physical setting, this is where the individual experiences activities, roles, and interpersonal relationships with others within the settings of family, peers, school, and neighborhood. The 4-H club setting is an example of a microsystem. The *mesosystem* is described as the connections between two or more microsystems. For example, the mesosystem describes the relationship between the individual’s family experiences and the individual’s school experiences.

The *exosystem* is described as settings that do not involve the individual directly as an active participant, but the individual is affected by what happens in these other settings. An example of the *exosystem* is a parent’s workplace. If the parent receives a job promotion that requires more travel, it will reduce the interaction between the parent and child that occurs in the family setting. The *macrosystem* is described as the culture in which an individual lives. Culture is the behavior patterns, beliefs, and other products of a group that are passed from generation to generation. The *chronosystem* is a time factor that describes the pattern of events and transitions over the life course (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Santrock, 2001).

The term *proximal process* is used to describe the process of development over time through interaction between an evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate external environment. To produce development, these interactions must become progressively more complex.
Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological theory of human development is applicable to the developmental opportunities in the 4-H club. The microsystem is characterized by activities, interpersonal relationships, and roles. The 4-H club setting is an example of the microsystem where 4-H club members experience a variety of activities, develop interpersonal relationships, and hold different roles. The 4-H club member engages in a variety of activities including participation in business meetings, club recreational activities, club community service projects, and other group activities. These activities occur in a structured and routine environment in close quarters with others. The 4-H club member has the opportunity to interact and develop relationships with others including the volunteer club leaders and the other club members. These individuals may socially influence the thoughts and behavior of the 4-H club members. The member may take on new roles that are likely to be different from those played in their home or school environment. The club member may hold a club office and may work on committees with other members throughout the 4-H year.

The mesosystem involves the relations between the microsystems or connections between contexts. The blending of youth from different school districts is an example of the mesosystem. While in the club setting, 4-H members may meet and interact with others including volunteer club leaders and other club members.
others from different school districts and learn about the culture in each school district. This in turn influences their interactions once they are no longer in the club environment. In addition, the 4-H club members may develop relationships with other club members and volunteer leaders during their club experience, and these relationships may continue outside of the club setting.

Examples of the exosystem in relation to clubs are the decisions made about 4-H programs by advisory boards. Financial support from funding officials such as the state legislature and county commissioners is another example of the exosystem. Although these decisions made by advisory boards, funding officials, and other stakeholder groups are not made directly in the club setting, club members are indirectly affected by these decisions by the opportunities they create and the standards that must be met.

An example of the macrosystem is the value placed on the development of life skills in youth. Society believes that it is important for youth to develop into competent adults and the 4-H club setting is an example of where youth can develop life skills. The club culture is another example of the macrosystem. The club’s culture includes expectations of members, as well as structured and routine activities in a supportive environment.

Returning to a 4-H club another year is an example of the chronosystem. Returning to the club gives the 4-H member another year to further develop life skills and relationships with others. The development of life skills and relationships also influences the 4-H member in other aspects of their life. The 4-H youth may learn that they enjoy working with children and decide to look into studying child-related careers in college.
A 4-H club provides a setting where youth experience different activities and roles, and have the chance to develop interpersonal relationships with others of different age groups and from different communities and schools. Their experiences are affected by the decisions made by stakeholders such as 4-H advisory boards, and how society views youth and clubs. Thus, Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Theory illustrates how the club setting provides a place for potential positive youth development.

**Description of Csikszentmihalyi’s Theory of Flow**

In order for youth to remain involved in the 4-H program, they must be motivated to do so. Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of flow presents intrinsic motivation as growing out of the experience of challenge (Larson et al., 2004). Csikszentmihalyi found that intrinsic motivation was strongest when people were engaged with a challenge that is matched to their abilities, while motivation falls when people try to achieve goals that are either too easy or too hard for them (Larson, 2006). Therefore, the core of Csikszentmihalyi’s theory is that when people experience their skills as matched to the challenges of an activity, they have the experience of absorption and enjoyment, an experience evident in youths’ reports of excitement and fun (Larson et al., 2004). According to Csikszentmihalyi, when individuals experience meaningful challenges that are matched to their skills, they experience sustained enjoyment or “flow,” which is repeated each time they participate in the activity. Hence, this enjoyment of challenge is self-reinforcing and creates the desire to repeat the experience (Larson et al., 2004).

**Application Csikszentmihalyi’s Theory of Flow to the 4-H Club Setting**

4-H members enroll in 4-H projects through their club. Over 200 project areas are available through the Ohio 4-H program. Most project areas offer beginner,
intermediate, and advanced level projects in an attempt to match the various skills levels of 4-H members. 4-H also offers “self-determined” projects so that if members have reached the most advanced level in a project area and still wish to learn more, they can enroll in a self-determined project to continue their learning in that area. Offering various ability levels within a project area is directly in line with Csikszentmihalyi’s theory which contends that when people experience their skills as matched to the challenges of an activity, they have the experience of absorption and enjoyment, an experience evident in youths’ reports of excitement and fun (Larson et al., 2004).

The experience of challenge is key to Csikszentmihalyi’s Theory of Flow. When operating ideally, 4-H clubs offer youth meaningful challenges that are matched to their skills. 4-H clubs give members the opportunity to hold club offices. Often younger members hold offices such as health officer, safety officer, or recreation leader because these offices are appropriately matched to the skills of a younger member, while members typically hold more challenging offices, such as President, Vice-President, Secretary, and Treasurer later in their 4-H club tenure. 4-H clubs also offer the opportunity to serve in other leadership roles such as serving on committees. A member in their first few years may find it exciting and challenging to simply serve as a member of a committee, while a member with more tenure may need to serve as a committee chairperson in order to experience the “flow” described in Csikszentmihalyi’s Theory. However, 4-H clubs have a limited amount of club officers and some clubs do not utilize committees. If members are not able to obtain club leadership positions that match their developing skills, they may begin to lose interest in the club and in 4-H in general.
Since the beginning of the program, 4-H has relied upon volunteers. 4-H volunteers organize community 4-H clubs. Clubs function fairly independently, and therefore all function very differently. A major factor in young peoples’ satisfaction or dissatisfaction with programs and organizations in which they are involved is the degree of control maintained by adults. Some clubs are more “member-directed,” while others are more “leader-directed.” In member-directed clubs, members are responsible for the majority of the planning and decision making within the club. Volunteers serve primarily in an advisory capacity and assist youth in planning and decision making. In clubs that are more leader-directed, adult volunteers take responsibility for the majority of the planning and decision making for the club. Often in this type of club, youth simply show up to participate in the programs and activities which the adult volunteers have planned.

In a study by Astroth (1996) five 4-H clubs were intensively studied over a 12-month period. Astroth concluded that autonomy-oriented leaders (i.e., those who supported member-directed clubs) were able to foster both life skills and practical, noncognitive skills, and they did so better than control-oriented leaders. The study found that autonomy-oriented leaders brought a certain sets of skills and interests to youth groups that maximized youth potential for healthy growth and development, while control-oriented leaders (i.e., those whose clubs were leader-directed clubs) impeded, and in some cases detoured, this development. Finally, Astroth (1996) found that members of control-oriented clubs were significantly less satisfied with their 4-H experience and were less likely to characterize 4-H as enjoyable.

Youth, especially older youth, tend to drop out of programs when adults maintain total control. Youth commitment tends to grow in situations where adults share control
and provide youth with real and important roles and responsibilities in keeping with the
interests and skills of those involved. This clearly relates to Csikszentmihalyi’s Theory
of Flow. When involved with leader-directed clubs, youth are not challenged, and they
simply lose interest in the program or organization. Member-directed clubs provide
challenges needed for young people to experience “flow” as described by
Csikszentmihalyi.

Adolescent Involvement in Youth Activities

Studies Concerning Adolescents’ Commitment to Youth Activities

Several studies have documented a general decline in organized activity
While much attention has focused on understanding the dropout phenomenon, many
adolescents do remain involved, some even increasing their involvement during this
period. Because youth benefit from programs only if they remain in the program, it is
important to understand when changes in participation occur and what motivates the
decline in participation.

It has been proposed that youth activities provide adolescents with opportunities
for exploration, which are used to facilitate identity development. Waterman (1984)
suggested that adolescents try out different youth activities as part of their identity
exploration and development. A study by Fredricks, Alfeld-Liro, Hruda, Eccles, Patrick,
and Ryan (2002) sought to enhance the understanding of factors that influenced
adolescents’ commitments to extracurricular activities over time. The authors concluded
that decisions regarding extracurricular participation were made up of a complex synergy
of enjoyment of the activity, feeling competent at the task, being in a socially supportive environment, perceiving the context as challenging, perceiving more benefits than costs, and being in an activity that supports identity development. These factors led to adolescents persisting in activities, or in other cases, discontinuing participation in one activity or switching to others.

Dworkin, Larson, and Hansen (2003) conducted ten focus groups in order to get high school students’ descriptions of their “growth experiences” as a result of their participation in extracurricular and community-based activities. The youth reported both personal and interpersonal processes of development. Across domains, adolescents described themselves as the agents of their own development and change.

A subsequent study by Hansen, Larson, and Dworkin (2003) also found a relationship between involvement in youth activities and identity exploration and development. The study inventoried adolescents’ reports on different developmental and negative experiences in organized youth activities, including extracurricular and community-based activities. High school students’ experiences were assessed using the Youth Experiences Survey (YES). These youth reported higher rates of learning experiences in youth activities than in two other major contexts in their lives (school and hanging out with friends). Youth activities were associated with experiences related to initiative, identity exploration and reflection, emotional learning, developing teamwork skills, and forming ties with community members. The findings also suggested that different youth activities offer distinct patterns of learning experiences.

Finally, in 2004, Lauver, Little, and Weiss published an article that highlighted current research and evaluation work in the out-of-school time field. The review revealed
10 strategies that out-of-school programs have used to successfully recruit youth and maintain participation in out-school-time programs. The 10 strategies were listed as follows:

1. help youth understand the value of participation,
2. show families the opportunities associated with participation,
3. reach out directly to youth and their families in their homes and communities,
4. match the program’s attendance goals to participant needs,
5. consider at-risk youth in recruitment efforts,
6. recruit friends to join together,
7. hire program staff who develop real connections with participants,
8. hook youth with both fun and relaxing times,
9. link academics to an engaging project, and
10. give high school youth extra opportunities.

In conclusion, the existing research demonstrates that young people engage in different youth activities as part of their identity exploration and development, and these activities can offer distinct learning experiences not available in other contexts of youths’ lives. However, decisions regarding participation in youth activities are complex and warrant further investigation.

Adolescents’ Negative Experiences with Organized Youth Activities

Research is increasingly showing that organized youth activities, such as extracurricular activities and community-based youth programs, are a context of positive development for adolescents (Eccles & Templeton, 2002). However, there is also
evidence, of a less complete nature, that organized youth activities are sometimes a context of negative experiences.

Negative experiences are important to understand because they can interfere with this positive development, as these negative experiences may disrupt engagement in important developmental relationships within an organized activity (Dworkin & Larson, 2007). A National Academy of Sciences report identified eight features that make youth programs contexts of positive development, including: physical and psychological safety, appropriate structure, supportive relationships, opportunities for belonging, positive social norms, support for efficacy and mattering, opportunity for skills building, and integration of family, school, and community efforts (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). All eight features are factors that are influenced by adult leaders (Dworkin & Larson, 2007). Research on mentoring and youth sports suggests that a single negative experience with a mentor or coach often has proportionally more influence on that relationship than a single positive experience (Rhodes, 2002; Smoll & Smith, 1996). Likewise, conflict with peers can reduce the learning that might occur within organized youth activities (Larson et al., 2004). Negative experiences can also lead youth to drop out of organized activities and totally disengage from learning in this context (Dworkin & Larson, 2007).

A study by Dworkin and Larson (2007) aimed to develop a better understanding of negative experiences in youth activities. Ten focus groups were conducted with adolescents. Youths’ descriptions provided an overview of the range of types of negative experiences they encountered in extracurricular and community youth based programs, as well as how they responded to these negative experiences. In the study, participants identified five categories of persons portrayed as the sources of their negative
experiences, including peers, adult leaders, themselves, parents, and community members. The most frequent types of negative experiences involved peers and peer group dynamics and aversive behavior attributed to the adult leaders of the activities. The youth described two types of responses to their negative experiences – a passive response of feeling negative emotions, and active coping, which sometimes led to learning.

According to Larson (2006), a goal of positive youth development is for youths’ own internal motivation to be activated. Walker, Dunham, and Snyder (1998) purported that intrusive adult control robs young people of the opportunity to practice problem solving and decision making. For many participants, adult-dominated youth groups feel a lot like what they experience at school and at home; therefore, they move quickly out to spend their leisure and recreational time in arenas where they can exercise choice, control, and leadership (Walker, Dunham, & Snyder, 1998).

Lastly, a recent study by McNeely (2004) that investigated the experiences of Ohio 4-H camp counselors found that while their experiences were overall very positive, 21.7% of counselor respondents revealed that adults being controlling and manipulative negatively impacted their 4-H camp counselor experience. Therefore, theory and research leads to the conclusion that adults who are over-controlling undermine motivation and learning, while adults are most effective when they support youth’s experiences of ownership and agency (Ryan & Deci, 2003).

In summary, negative experiences are important to understand because they can interfere with positive development. Negative experiences may disrupt engagement in important developmental relationships within an organized activity, and they can lead to
participants limiting or discontinuing their involvement with youth development programs.

**Research on 4-H and 4-H Club Work**

The Ohio 4-H program uses a variety of delivery methods to help youth develop life skills. However, interestingly, the core delivery method, 4-H club work, has received relatively little attention in regards to published research.

Club work has been the foundation of the 4-H program. Community clubs provide youth with opportunities to learn about forming organizations and decision-making groups, skills that prepare them for adult roles in leadership and decision making. Clubs often elect officers and committee chairs. Using elected officers allows youth the opportunity to learn and apply various life skills such as communication and leadership. Club members learn how to negotiate decisions such as participating in a fund raising event or taking a bus trip (Van Horn, Flannagan, & Thomson, 1998).

The practice of having volunteers lead 4-H clubs was established at the beginning of the 4-H program and continues today. Leaders provide the local expertise in subject areas as well as offering adult mentoring in most clubs. Many of today’s leaders are members of the third and fourth generation of original Extension families. This intergenerational continuity demonstrates the success of the leadership development components of the 4-H club program as well as the commitment and loyalty 4-H instills in its membership (Van Horn, Flannagan, & Thomson, 1998).

Several studies have attempted to determine if participation in non-formal educational programs such as 4-H have an impact on youth. For example, Heinsohn and
Cantrell (1986) found that 4-H members perceived themselves having developed “good” levels of leadership, communication, and personal development skills, while Boyd, Herring, and Briers (1992) also found that 4-H club members had developed specific life skills through the 4-H experience. In a study of 196 4-H alumni by Fox, Schroeder, and Lodl (2003), 4-H club involvement was found to have the most influence on the respondents in the areas of development of responsibility, product production skills, the ability to handle competition, and gaining the ability to meet new people.

In 1996, Astroth found that 4-H effectively develops life skills in 4-H members. His research showed that 4-H clubs were effective in helping youth develop critical life skills such as decision-making, responsibility, interpersonal skills, a service ethic, and social skills. In addition, 4-H clubs emphasized developing practical, technical skills, and members often cited the hands-on learning opportunities available through the club experience as vital to their skill development.

Gregoire (2004) engaged in a qualitative research project with the goal of deepening the understanding of 4-H clubs. Through the study, 48 older 4-H youth participated in focus groups and 25 parents and volunteer leaders involved in New York 4-H programs participated in structured interviews. After talking with teens, parents, and 4-H volunteers, Gregoire concluded that the following elements were integral to the 4-H club experience: (a) a positive relationship with a caring adult, (b) a safe environment, (c) an opportunity for mastery, (d) an opportunity to serve others, (e) an inclusive environment, (f) engagement in learning, (g) an opportunity to see oneself as an active participant in the future, and (h) an opportunity for self-determination.
In 2000, the Montana Extension Service conducted a survey in 21 randomly selected counties. Within each of these counties, two school districts were randomly selected for the study. All students in the 5th, 7th, and 9th grades were surveyed using a 74-question survey instrument. The survey included basic demographic and family composition questions as well as questions grouped into 8 subscales, including: (a) leadership, (b) social competency, (c) positive self-identify, (d) relations with adults, (e) self-confidence, (f) empowerment, (g) compassion, and (h) skills. Approximately 2,500 youth were used in the analysis (Astroth & Haynes, 2002).

Research revealed that 4-H participants are more likely than other kids to: (a) succeed in school, getting more A’s than other kids, (b) be involved as leaders in their school and the community, (c) be looked up to as role models by other kids, and (d) help others in the community. Moreover, 4-H kids reported that they were less likely than other kids to: (a) shoplift or steal, (b) use illegal drugs of any kind to get high, (c) ride in a car with someone else who has been drinking, (d) smoke cigarettes, (e) damage property for the fun of it, and (f) skip school or cut classes without permission (Astroth & Haynes, 2002).

Finally, Montana 4-H members credited the program with making a significant difference in their lives, in the quality of their family life, and in the quality of life in their community. For example, in the study, half of all youth who had been members of 4-H agreed that their participation in 4-H had been critical to their success in life, while more than 6 of 10 youth who had been 4-H members said that 4-H had made a positive difference in their life (Astroth & Haynes, 2002).
The Montana 4-H Impact Study was replicated in Idaho in 2002 and 2003. The study was conducted in a nearly identical format with only minor adaptations made. The study intended to determine the awareness and attitudes of students in 5th, 7th, and 9th grades within the state of Idaho concerning the depth of the perception of their own development and the impact 4-H may have had on them. The population consisted of a stratified random sample of 18 selected counties, with four schools in each county being randomly selected. Findings of the Idaho Impact survey revealed that young people who had participated in 4-H for 2 years or more were less likely to engage in “at-risk” behaviors such as drinking alcohol, shoplifting, drug use, damaging property, or smoking cigarettes than their non-4-H classmates (Goodwin et al., 2005).

The same study was replicated once again in 2005 in Colorado by Goodwin, Carroll, and Oliver. Students in the 5th, 7th, and 9th grades in 15 counties in Colorado were surveyed. While in Montana (Astroth & Haynes, 2002) and Idaho (Goodwin et al., 2005) study participants were less likely to participate in at-risk behaviors than their classmates who were not in 4-H, results from Colorado were different. Among females, none of the at-risk behaviors were significantly different based on 4-H membership. The non-4-H Youth Development male students, however, were almost four times more likely to report having smoked and just over six times more likely to have used drugs than their 4-H Youth Development classmates (Goodwin et al., 2005).

While the at-risk behaviors data were not congruent with findings in Montana and Idaho, in Colorado there was a notable difference in the two groups of students in the assets they demonstrated. Academically and socially, the Colorado 4-H Youth
Development members showed themselves to be much more likely than non-4-H Youth Development students to exhibit positive behaviors (Goodwin et al., 2005).

Finally, in 2008, Lewis engaged in a descriptive survey of Ohio youth in grades 5, 7, and 9 to explore if out-of-school activities made a difference in their lives. Specifically, the study sought to describe the impact of the Ohio 4-H community club program. Three groups of youth were compared through the study, including 4-H members, other youth organization members, and non-4-H members. Results showed that 4-H members responded more positively to items related to self-identity, relationships with adults, future happiness, being listened to by adults in their communities, and improving their communities. 4-H members also felt their out-of-school involvement had made positive differences in their family life and that 4-H was an organization where they could explore their unique interests that they could not explore elsewhere in their community.

In conclusion, the studies outlined above clearly indicate that participation in 4-H youth development programs leads to positive youth development. It is evident that youth cannot benefit from 4-H if they do not remain active in programming; however, the 4-H program continues to struggle with member retention, especially among older youth.

Studies Involving Retention of 4-H Youth

Relatively little research has been performed on the retention of 4-H youth. One of the first studies focusing on retention of 4-H member was conducted by Hartley in 1983 and compared 4-H re-enrollees, 4-H dropouts, and non 4-H members. Shortly thereafter, a 1985 article by Astroth discussed an attempt by counties in southeast Kansas
to increase the retention rate of first year 4-H members by developing a new family coordinator position in each club. In the 1990s, five additional studies related to 4-H member retention were conducted with another five studies being conducted during the last seven years. A brief summary of research of 4-H retention follows.

**Early Research on 4-H Retention**

In an investigation of retention of 4-H youth, Hartley (1983) compared 4-H re-enrollees, 4-H dropouts, and non 4-H members. Findings revealed that first-year members who rejoined were found to have attended more club meetings and to have taken part in more 4-H events and activities than did first-year 4-H dropouts. Parents of 4-H re-enrollees were also found to be more supportive than parents of dropouts. In addition, Hartley found that the older 4-H members were when they enrolled, the less likely they were to continue. Finally, club leaders with a 51%-100% rate of first-year member re-enrollment received more positive ratings for leader effectiveness from Extension professionals than did 4-H club leaders with a 0%-50% re-enrollment rate. Lastly, the ratio of 4-H members to 4-H leaders within 4-H clubs was inversely associated with re-enrollment.

An article by Astroth (1985) discussed an attempt by counties in southeast Kansas to increase the retention rate of first-year 4-H members by developing a new family coordinator position in each club. The impetus for this endeavor was the discovery that county 4-H programs in Kansas were losing 40% to 50% of members within the first year of membership, and another 20% in the second year of membership. Each family coordinator received a detailed teaching outline of six sessions that were to be held with new families throughout the year in an attempt to prepare the families for upcoming
events. New families reported a greater sense of satisfaction and belonging as a result of
the family coordinators. However, long-term effects on retention were not reported.

Retention Studies in the 1990s

In 1991, a study of 4-H members in grade seven through twelve by Acosta and
Holt aimed to determine what topic areas were of interest to teens and what areas were
not of interest to teens. Findings revealed that topics that have been the mainstay of 4-H
programming for years were no longer of primary interest to teens. In addition, titles
assigned to concepts may be turning off some teens. For example, teens in the study
indicated that they did not want more information on nutrition and health, yet were less
adamant about not receiving information on fitness, a more current topic. The article
concluded that designing programs to meet the “felt needs” of clientele is important when
trying to maintain involvement with 4-H teens.

A study by Cano and Bankston (1992) explored factors associated with
participation and nonparticipation of ethnic minority youth in the Ohio 4-H program.
The study also sought to identify the perception of minority parents regarding their
childrens’ participation and nonparticipation in Ohio 4-H. Focus group interviews were
conducted in eight Ohio counties. Finding revealed that in general, minority youth found
4-H to provide a positive experience. However, youth and parents also perceived several
factors as barriers to participation, including: conflict with other activities, inequality of
judging activities, inability to get parents interested and involved, lack of advertising
targeting minority youth, and lack of minority adult role models involved in 4-H.

In 1993, Norland and Bennett published an article related to retention of 4-H
youth. The Norland and Bennett study of 4-H members ages 13 to 19 investigated
satisfaction with participation in 4-H among older youth. Results showed that commitment, responsibility, and feelings gained when working with younger 4-H members contributed the most to member satisfaction. High quality club meetings and positive parental involvement were also positively correlated with member satisfaction. Very low relationships were found between satisfaction and some previously studied factors, such as number and type of projects taken, advisor participation, peer pressure, and tenure as a 4-H member. Lastly, urban and rural youth exhibited no differences in their satisfaction.

Another 1993 study, this time by Ritchie and Resler, also investigated retention of 4-H youth. In the Ritchie and Resler study, 92 4-H dropouts between the ages of 10 and 18, and 63 parents of dropouts were interviewed. The most frequent reason given by youth for dropping out of 4-H related to displeasure with 4-H clubs, ranging from boring meetings to not getting enough help with projects. The second most frequent answer was that youth were too busy with sports, and the third was that he or she was too busy with a job. The answer most frequently given by parents as the reason their child had dropped out of the program was that their child was not happy with their club. The second reason given by parents was that the youth was too busy with sports, and the third was that the youngster was dissatisfied with projects.

Retention of 4-H youth was again the topic of a 1999 article by Wingenbach, Meighan, Lawrence, Gartin, and Woloshuk. Data for the study were collected from county 4-H club leaders and Extension agents to determine effective recruitment and retention techniques for increasing enrollment in the West Virginia 4-H program. The highest rated recruitment techniques were: (a) having exciting and active clubs to entice
others to join; (b) making members feel welcome; and (c) allowing 4-H members to take active roles in the club. The highest rated retention techniques were: (a) having an effective county 4-H agent, staff, and 4-H leader; (b) being “pro” fun; (c) having fun camping programs; (d) providing praise, motivation, and encouragement; (e) letting older members know how important they are to the success of the club; and (f) providing efficient and fun meetings, programs, and activities.

**Recent Retention Studies**

Five studies related to retention of 4-H youth have been performed in the early 21st century. In 2002, Lauxman investigated the differences between youth who stayed enrolled and those who dropped out of the 4-H program in Pima County, Arizona. Fifty-seven youth who dropped out and 161 who were current members in grades 5 through 8 were surveyed to ascertain their responses for comparison. Findings revealed that factors statistically significant for both group and gender were: (a) learning in 4-H, (b) helping others, and (c) belonging to 4-H. The study found that many youth sought opportunities for new learning experiences and many became bored with repetitious tasks. Another finding was that youth who dropped out were dissatisfied with the planning and decision-making they were allowed to do in 4-H. Finally, “logistics” were found to be a strong reason for members dropping out of the program, as youth cited time constraints and participation in others activities as reasons for leaving the program.

In a 2005 Colorado study by Harder, Lamm, Lamm, Rose, and Rask, ES-237 records from 2002 and 2003 were examined. ES-237 data are gathered in each county and state annually, and include demographic information for all youth and volunteers involved in the 4-H program. An examination of the data from Colorado revealed that
older youth were less likely to join 4-H. Furthermore, findings revealed that a high percentage of youth dropped out of the 4-H program after the first year. Lastly, the study found a steady decline in the member population beginning at age 12, and continuing through age 18. The authors concluded that 4-H was struggling to meet the needs of older youth, as the data revealed that it was difficult not only to attract older members, but difficult to retain them.

In 2006, Ferrari and Turner explored adolescents’ perceptions of their experiences in a youth development organization. Specifically, the study wished to identify reasons for joining and reasons for continued participation, as well as barriers for joining and continued participation. Open-ended interviews with seven youth from Adventure Central, an urban 4-H education center, were included in the study. The study revealed that there were many reasons why adolescents joined and continued to participate at Adventure Central. These youth felt a sense of belonging and safety, received the academic support they wanted and needed, and had fun. They also developed relationships with adults, were engaged in learning, and fulfilled meaningful roles.

In 2007, Homan, Dick, and Hedrick investigated the perceptions of 4-H among youth who (a) were currently enrolled in 4-H, (b) those who were former members of 4-H (but left the organization), and (c) those who never enrolled in 4-H. Results showed that youth who were currently involved in 4-H perceived the organization more favorable than youth who had never been involved in 4-H. Older youth were less likely to find 4-H as appealing, and as youth aged, they were less likely to agree that 4-H was "fun" and "cool," and were more likely to agree that 4-H was "boring.” Older youth were also less
likely to report that they intended to remain involved in 4-H and also indicated that their parents and friends were less likely to encourage them to remain involved in 4-H.

Finally, a study by Russell and Heck (2008) examined age trends in program enrollment using data from over 221,000 youth enrolled in the California 4-H Youth Development program from 1992 to 2002. Results showed that the large number of enrollees at middle school age for any given enrollment year was due to a complex pattern. Before age 11, there were great numbers of youth who both joined and left the program on a consistent annual basis, followed by increased program dropout after age 11, and significantly lower rates of new enrollment among youth ages 14 and older.

The study by Russell and Heck (2008) also revealed that African American and Latino youth were more likely to drop out of 4-H than Caucasian youth. In addition, youth living on farms were significantly less likely to drop out than any other group, although youth in cities of 50,000 people or more had lower dropout rates than youth in small towns or suburbs. The study thus concluded that while the “middle school dropout” phenomena is indeed a concern, program retention at all ages is an equally important challenge.

Overall, the studies of 4-H member retention reveal that older youth are difficult to attract and retain in the 4-H youth development program. Several trends are apparent from reviewing this body of literature. First, it is evident that older youth find 4-H less appealing and are less likely to join 4-H than younger youth (Harder et al., 2005; Homan, et al., 2007; Russell & Heck, 2008). If older youth do join the 4-H program, they are more likely to discontinue their involvement when compared to those who joined at a younger age (Hartley, 1983). However, it is also apparent from reviewing the literature
that retention is not only a challenge when dealing with older 4-H youth, but a challenge for 4-H youth of all ages (Astroth, 1985, Russell & Heck, 2008).

Several studies revealed the importance of adult club advisors to a members’ satisfaction with the 4-H program (Ferrari & Turner, 2006; Hartley, 1983; Wingenbach, et al., 1999) while one study found members’ relationship with adults to have little effect on retention (Lauxman, 2002). Other studies indicated that satisfaction with the 4-H club experience influenced members’ decision not to re-enroll (Norland & Bennett, 1993; Ritchie & Resler, 1993; Wingenbach, 1999). It should be noted that there is likely an overlap when discussing the displeasure with adult club advisors and displeasure with 4-H clubs, as adult advisors play an important role in a member’s 4-H club experience. In short, positive or negative experiences with club advisors would likely impact a member’s overall club experience.

In a review of the research, the extent to which members’ parents were involved and supportive of their participation in 4-H emerged as a factor in the retention of 4-H youth (Astroth, 1985; Cano & Bankston, 1992; Hartley, 1983; Homan et al., 2007; Norland & Bennett, 1993, Ritchie & Resler, 1993). Several studies also discussed the importance of incorporating “fun” into a members’ 4-H experience (Ferrari & Turner, 2006; Homan et al., 2007; Ritchie & Resler, 1993; Wingenbach et al., 1999), while two studies discussed dissatisfaction with 4-H projects as an influence on member retention (Acosta & Holt, 1991; Ritchie & Resler, 1993). Other results that only appeared in few studies were the inequality of judging activities (Cano & Bankston, 1992); conflicts with other activities (Lauxman, 2002; Ritchie & Resler, 1993); the influence of the Extension agent and Extension staff (Wingenbach et al., 1999); the influence of the county’s
camping program (Wingenbach et al., 1999); the importance of engagement in learning
(Ferrari & Turner, 2006; Lauxman, 2002); the importance of a sense of belonging
(Lauxman, 2002), and the importance of members fulfilling meaningful roles through the
4-H program (Ferrari & Turner, 2006; Lauxman, 2002).

The studies discussed above concerning 4-H retention have varied greatly in their
methodology and in who has been included as participants. Two studies have used 4-H
enrollment data to examine trends concerning the retention of 4-H youth (Harder et al.,
2005; Russell & Heck, 2008). Many studies have used written questionnaires as their
primary method to examine the topic of 4-H retention (Hartley, 1983; Homan et al.,
2007; Lauxman, 2008; Norland & Bennett, 2006; Wingenbach et al., 1999), while one
study used interviews to collect data (Ritchie & Resler, 1993). Interestingly, only two
studies on 4-H retention have utilized focus group methodology (Cano & Bankston,
1992; Ferrari & Turner, 2006).

Regarding the groups studied through previous research, one study surveyed 4-H
class advisors and 4-H professionals (Wingenbach et al., 1999), while other studies have
included only current 4-H members (Ferrari & Turner, 2006; Norland & Bennett, 1993). Three studies compared groups of youth, including current 4-H members, 4-H drop-outs,
and youth that had never been 4-H members (Hartley, 1983; Homan et al., 2007;
Lauxman, 2002), while two studies included parents as participants (Cano & Bankston,

Despite the research discussed above, there is still much to learn about the
complicated issue of 4-H retention. Few of the studies that investigated 4-H retention
asked the youth themselves why they chose not to re-enroll in the program. An
understanding of why youth choose not to re-enroll in the 4-H program has many implications for practice. The current study will help youth development professionals better understand the retention of older 4-H members.

**Summary**

Adolescence is a period where youth experience many physical, cognitive, and emotional changes. To help adolescents successfully navigate their teen years, they need assistance from many sources including families, schools, neighborhoods, and the culture surrounding them. These support systems are what Bronfenbrenner (1979) described to be present in his ecological theory of human development. Experiences in 4-H clubs are believed to provide a setting for positive youth development.

Studies indicate that adolescents can learn important life skills through their participation in 4-H clubs; however studies also reveal many youth leave the 4-H program when they reach adolescence. Clearly, youth must be motivated to remain involved in the 4-H program and Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of flow describes motivation as growing out of the experience of challenge, in that motivation is strongest when individuals are engaged in a challenge matched to their abilities. This leads to questions concerning whether 4-H members are being challenged through their 4-H club experience.

Adolescents’ decisions regarding extracurricular participation have been shown to be complex (Fredricks et al., 2002). While involvement in community-based youth programs, such as 4-H, is associated with positive youth development, there is also evidence that organized youth activities can also be a context of negative experiences.
Few studies have examined the reasons why older youth choose to discontinue their involvement in the 4-H program. Why do these youth choose to leave the program? How does their 4-H club experience impact their decision not to re-enroll? These questions can be investigated through the study of older youth who were former 4-H club members.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study was designed to explore factors related to youth discontinuing their involvement with the Erie County 4-H Youth Development program. Focus groups were used to gather qualitative data to answer the research questions. This chapter will discuss the methodology used to conduct the study which includes the following: research design, population and subject selection procedures, instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis plan.

Focus Groups

Focus groups were utilized to gather information concerning the reasons why older 4-H youth choose to leave the 4-H program. Focus groups are group interviews in which a moderator guides the interview while a small group discusses the topics that the interviewer raises. Focus groups are fundamentally a way of listening to people and learning from them. What the participants in the group say during their discussions are the essential data in focus groups (Morgan, 1998).

Focus groups are, above all, a qualitative research method. As such, they use guided group discussions to generate a rich understanding of participants’ experiences
and beliefs. Qualitative methods are especially useful for exploration and discovery, and focus groups are frequently used to learn about either topics or groups of people that are poorly understood. Qualitative methods also excel at interpretation—giving an understanding of why things are the way they are and how they got to be that way (Morgan, 1998).

All techniques for gathering information have limitations, and focus groups are no exception. First, focus group interviews allow participants to influence and interact with each other, and as a result, group members are able to influence the course of the discussion. This results in some inefficiencies such as detours in the discussion and the raising of irrelevant issues, thus requiring the moderator to keep the discussion focused (Krueger, 1998).

Second, focus group data are more difficult to analyze. Group interaction provides a social environment, and comments must be interpreted within that context. Care must also be taken to avoid lifting comments out of context and out of sequence (Krueger, 1998).

Finally, focus group techniques require carefully trained interviewers. Techniques, such as pauses and probes, and knowing when and how to move into a new topic area, require a degree of expertise typically not possessed by untrained interviewers (Krueger, 1998).

Despite the limitations concerning focus groups, there are several advantages of utilizing focus group methodology to explore the retention of older 4-H youth. First, focus group interviews are a socially oriented research procedure and people are social creatures who interact with each other. They are influenced by the comments of others
and make decisions after listening to the advice of people around them. Focus groups place people in real life situations as opposed to the controlled experimental situations typical of quantitative studies. In addition, inhibitions are often relaxed in group situations, and the more natural environment prompts increased candor by respondents (Krueger, 1998).

Although the data obtained in group interviews can be influenced by social desirability (Krueger, 1998), youths’ experiences in organized activities often emerge and are given voice through interactions with others. Thus the dynamic of focus groups is well suited to eliciting young people’s accounts of the variety of negative experiences they encounter in this context (Dworkin & Larson, 2007).

Second, focus group discussions have the advantage of allowing the moderator to probe. The flexibility to explore issues is not possible with the structured questioning sequences of survey research (Krueger, 1998).

Finally, focus group interviews have high face validity. The technique is easily understood and the results seem believable to those using the information. Results are not presented in complicated statistical charts, but rather in lay terminology (Krueger, 1998).

Focus group methodology was selected for the current study because retention of older 4-H youth is an issue that is still being explored, and focus groups are useful in learning about topics that are poorly understood. In short, the depth of information gathered was more important than the breadth. In addition, when trying to determine why young people choose not to re-enroll in the 4-H program, having the ability to probe for further information was important. Unlike survey research, focus group methodology
provides this flexibility. Finally, focus groups provide interaction with other individuals, and youths’ experiences in organized activities often emerge and are given voice through interactions with others.

Population and Subject Selection

The population for this study consisted of Erie County youth who were ages 11 to 17 during the 2007 4-H program year who were enrolled in 4-H in an Erie County community 4-H club in 2007, but who did not re-enroll in 4-H in 2008. The study did not include 4-H members enrolled only in 4-H through their involvement in 4-H school enrichment or special emphasis programs as of the same dates. This age group was selected because previous research has shown that around the age of 11 or 12, member dropout begins to outpace new enrollments (Russell & Heck, 2008).

According to Krueger (1998), the ideal size of a focus group typically falls between 6 and 9 participants. The 6 to 9 person range provides enough different opinions to stimulate a discussion without making each participant compete for time to talk. Focus groups with more than 12 participants are not recommended for most situations because they limit each person’s opportunity to share insights and observations.

Erie County’s 4-H member database was used to obtain a listing of the names, addresses, and phone numbers of youth ages 12 to 18 in 2008 who were members of Erie County 4-H in 2007, but who did not re-enroll for 2008. From this list, individuals were contacted through their parent or guardian by the researcher and invited to participate in one of three focus group interviews for the purpose of investigating the reasons older youth do no re-enroll in the Erie County 4-H program.
The list of youth ages 12 to 18 in 2008 who were members of Erie County 4-H in 2007, but who did not re-enroll for 2008 consisted of 65 names. From the list of 65, eleven youth were unable to be reached because of disconnected phones. When contacted, several other youth and parents said that they were unable to participate due to conflicts with other activities, such as family vacations, school activities, and work schedules. Other youth and parents simply stated that they did not wish to participate in the study. Five youth, two in the first focus group, two in the second focus group, and one in the third focus group, agreed to participate, but then did not attend.

Frame error exists when there is a discrepancy between the actual population and the list containing the names of the population. Frame error did not present a problem, as care was taken by the researcher to ensure that only youth who met the age requirements, as specified, and only those who had been members of Erie County community 4-H clubs, were included in the list of names.

**Procedures for Focus Groups**

Each focus group session was held at the Erie County Services Center in Sandusky. The Service Center is a well-known building in the community that houses county offices, such as the Board of Elections, the Board of Education, OSU Extension, Erie County Soil and Water, and the offices for the Erie County commissioners. The focus groups were held in a small conference room on the first floor of the Services Center. A rectangular conference table was used with participants seated evenly around the table. Krueger (1994) described tables and chairs as being desirable because they
allowed participants to lean forward on the tables and participants were better able to maintain eye contact with one another.

A moderator team consisting of a moderator and an assistant moderator facilitated all of the focus groups. The same moderator and assistant moderator participated in all focus group sessions. The role of the moderator was to lead the group in discussion by asking questions and directing the flow of the conversation.

The moderator selected to lead the focus groups in the current study received her doctorate from The Ohio State University in 2007 in Agriculture and Extension Education. She was familiar with the 4-H program, but was not from Erie County or the surrounding counties and hence did not have an intimate knowledge of the Erie County 4-H program or its participants. After agreeing to serve as moderator, this individual attended a training session on moderating focus groups offered through the office of Program Development and Evaluation at The Ohio State University.

The researcher served as the assistant moderator for the three focus group sessions. The assistant moderator took comprehensive notes of the discussion and operated the recording equipment. The focus groups were recorded with a digital recorder placed in the middle of the table in order to record responses to the questions.

Pizza and drinks were provided at the conclusion of each focus group meeting. This provided an incentive for participants to attend the focus group sessions. In addition, a ten dollar gift certificate to the local mall was given to each youth participant as another incentive to attend the focus group session.
Instrumentation

The three focus group interviews were conducted in Erie County in July of 2008. Nine questions were developed for interviewing youth. The questioning route focused on barriers to participation involving older youth and the 4-H program. A variety of questions such as introductory, transition, key, and ending questions were used during the focus groups to gather data to answer the overall research questions. The questions were reviewed by a panel of experts to determine appropriate content, structure, and face validity. A list of focus group questions can be found in Appendix A.

All of the questions were structured as open-ended questions. By using open-ended questions, the participants responded to the questions based on their experiences. In other words, participants were permitted to say what they were thinking. Dichotomous questions, or questions that could be answered with a simple “yes” or “no” response, were not be asked because they would not have elicited responses which would have facilitated discussion within the group (Krueger, 1994).

Reflections as a Researcher

Because gathering qualitative data uses the researcher as the key instrument in analysis, the researcher interprets the data (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000). Therefore, the researcher is the key analysis research tool, because he or she organizes, interprets, and categorizes the qualitative responses. Thus, the researcher must be aware of how his or her past experiences may impact the data analysis.

As the researcher, I have had personal experience with the Ohio 4-H program as a youth participant and now, as an Extension Educator. My personal and professional
experiences with the Ohio 4-H program allow me to have insight into the 4-H club experience and the challenges involved in retaining 4-H youth.

In 1987, while in the third grade, I began my 4-H career in Ross County, Ohio. I was a ten-year 4-H member completing my 4-H tenure in 1996. I was simultaneously a member of two clubs during my 4-H career. I took livestock projects through one club and took family and consumer sciences and miscellaneous projects through the second club.

I entered The Ohio State University in the fall of 1996 with the intent of pursuing a career in Extension as a 4-H or Family & Consumer Sciences Educator. I graduated with a combined bachelors and masters degree in December of 2000, and started my position as 4-H Educator in Crawford County, Ohio that same month. In August of 2006, I transferred to Erie County, Ohio, where I currently serve as a 4-H Educator. The fact that the study was to be performed in Erie County led to the decision to bring in an outside moderator. I, as the researcher, did however participate in the focus group interviews as the assistant moderator.

Because of my experiences, I had insights and knowledge into the 4-H club experiences and the challenges involved in retaining youth in the 4-H program. While my personal experiences as a 4-H member were overwhelmingly positive, it was important for me to remain open to others’ perceptions of their experiences. In addition, because I currently work with the Erie County 4-H program, and because this study examined retention of Erie County 4-H members, it was incredibly important for me to be open and receptive to hearing criticism and negative comments about the 4-H program in Erie County. It is my hope that this study not only leads to a better understanding of
retention among 4-H youth, but leads to insight about barriers and challenges youth are experiencing as 4-H members in the county. I am hopeful this knowledge can lead to changes that can improve the Erie County 4-H program, and ultimately to changes that can improve 4-H programming statewide.

Validity and Reliability

Validity is the degree to which a procedure really measures what it proposes to measure. According to Krueger (1998), focus groups are valid if they are used carefully for a problem that is suitable for focus group inquiry.

The most basic type of validity is face validity—do the results look valid. Typically, focus groups have high face validity, which is due in large part to the believability of comments from participants. People open up in focus groups and share insights that may not be available from individual interviews, questionnaires, or other data sources.

A study by Reynolds and Johnson (1978) reported on a comparison of focus group discussions with a large scale mail-out survey. The two studies were both nationwide in scope—a mail survey of 2,000 females with a 90% response rate compared to a series of 20 focus groups in 10 cities. When the two studies were compared, there was a 97% level of agreement, while the focus group results proved to have greater predictive validity when compared to later sales data.

In order to establish face validity, the questions were reviewed by a panel of experts to determine appropriate content and structure. External validity, the degree to
which results of a study can be generalized, was not a major concern, as generalizability is typically not a goal of studies employing focus group methodology.

Data Collection Procedures

Approval for this study was sought and obtained through The Ohio State University Institutional Review Board (Protocol Number 2008B0121). Three focus groups were conducted at the Erie County Services Center in Sandusky, Ohio involving a total of 16 participants. Youth and their parents were notified of the date, time, and location of the focus group interviews when initially contacted about their participation. A telephone script can be found in Appendix B. After an individual agreed to attend a focus group, they were mailed a confirmation letter, found in Appendix C, and they received a reminder phone call the day before the focus group interview.

The focus group moderator began the interviews with a standard introduction which can be found in Appendix D. The three focus groups were recorded in two ways: through an audio recording and through hand written notes by the assistant moderator. The responsibilities of the assistant moderator included maintaining the audio recorder; taking detailed notes of quotes, body language, and obvious themes that develop; and handling unexpected interruptions such as late arrivals. The assistant moderator sat outside the discussion group and tried not to draw attention to herself. All questions in the questioning route were asked in all three focus groups.

Study Participants

Of the 65 eligible to participate, 16 youth participated in the three focus group interviews. The first focus group consisted of seven females 12 to 18 years of age, while
the second focus group was made up of five females and two males 12 to 18 years of age, for a total of 7 youth. Two youth, one male, age 15, and one female, age 17, participated in the third focus group interview. The average age of the focus group participants was 15.3 years. For the sixteen participants, participation in the Erie County 4-H program ranged from 3 to 11 years with an average of 5.7 years.

Data Analysis Procedures

As soon as a focus group interview concluded, the assistant moderator checked the audio recording to ensure proper operation. The moderator and assistant moderator also talked about the focus group that was just conducted, discussing topics such as the most important themes and ideas discussed, unexpected or unanticipated findings, and things that should be done differently for the next focus group.

Audio tapes were utilized to record each of the focus group sessions. Tapes were transcribed by recording verbatim how each participant responded to the questions. The researcher was the only one who had access to the original recordings.

In order to analyze the data, transcripts were reviewed line-by-line and themes were developed for each question. For each question in each of the three focus groups, major themes, minor themes, and unique responses were identified. After each focus group transcript had been analyzed, an overall analysis was performed for each question by identifying major themes, minor themes, and unique responses for each question for all three focus groups combined. Finally, the transcripts were reviewed for any common themes across the responses to all interview questions.
**Peer Review Process**

Validity concerns the accuracy or truthfulness of the qualitative findings. The researcher must present the findings as accurately as possible. One way of establishing validity in the research findings is through consensus. Consensus is defined as “agreement among competent others that the description, interpretation, evaluation, and thematics are right” (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002, p. 452).

The peer review process is one way of establishing validity. In the peer review process, colleagues or peers are provided with the raw data and the researcher’s interpretations of the data. The reviewer then considers whether the interpretation is reasonable (Ary et al., 2002). In this research study, one colleague who has had over 25 years of experience working with 4-H Youth Development on both the state and county level and has had extensive experience in the utilization of focus groups was asked to review the interpretations of the data. This colleague reviewed the interpretations and believed that the results were valid based on her experiences.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The findings reported here are based on three focus groups with a total of 16 former Erie County 4-H club members who were 12 to 18 years of age as of January 1, 2008. These youth spent from three to eleven years as 4-H club members. Chapter 4 answers each of the research questions by presenting the research question first, followed by the focus group questions developed to answer the research question. Themes that emerged from each focus group question are presented under the appropriate research question. Finally, common themes across responses were identified.

Research Question #1: Why Youth Choose Not to Re-Enroll

Youth were asked open-ended questions during the focus group interviews which were developed specifically to answer the question of why older youth choose to discontinue their involvement in the Erie County 4-H program. Therefore, below are the findings concerning: (a) the reasons youth choose not to re-enroll, (b) the influence of the 4-H club on re-enrollment, (c) the influence of how 4-H clubs were run on the decision not to re-enroll, and (d) how experiences with competition and the influence of competition impacted youths’ decision not to re-enroll.
Reasons for Not Re-enrolling in 4-H

Youth were asked to discuss why they chose not to re-enroll in the Erie County 4-H program. Youth stated that conflicts with other activities were an issue. Several participants were preparing to leave for college when the focus group interviews were conducted in July and some of these youth expressed a desire to have the summer to prepare for college or simply to have fun with their friends without the time demands of the 4-H program. For example, one youth stated that, “I’ll be attending college in August and I sort of wanted to have the summer before I go to college to not have to worry about judgings and interviews and stuff like that and 4-H meetings.”

Two youth discussed issues concerning their 4-H clubs disbanding. One youth whose club had disbanded after the 2007 4-H year expressed great disappointment that she had not joined the program in 2008 and felt she hadn’t received the assistance she needed in finding another club. She stated:

This past year my club has fell apart and the leader decided to quit on us but she didn’t give us any help in finding another club, so I was kinda on my own, so I went to the Extension Office to ask for help in finding a club, so they gave me something, but I don’t remember getting it, I don’t know what happened to it, so I went to school and asked my one friend who has her own club if I could join her club and she said, sure. But, she never gave me any information and the registration deadline had passed and I still wanted to be in 4-H because I had plans of running for Fair queen and I wanted to go to state my last year, since this would be my 10th year in 4-H. Time went by too fast I think.

Another participant revealed that his club had dissolved after the 2006 4-H year. He found another club to join right before the 2007 4-H enrollment deadline, but communication in the club was poor and most of the members were much younger than he was.
Influence of the 4-H Club

Youth were asked to discuss how their 4-H club influenced their decision not to re-enroll in the Erie County 4-H program. A major theme that clearly emerged was negative experiences with adults in the program, including advisors and parents. One youth discussed the constant arguing between adults involved in her club. One youth stated that, “In our old club it was a family type advisor thing and they were always fighting constantly, you couldn’t focus on one thing because they were always fighting.” Other youth discussed issues with parents, such as parents completing their children’s 4-H projects.

Several youth mentioned advisors who were uninvolved or unsupportive. One youth discussed an advisor who left it up to the club president to do everything, while another described an advisor who expected the club members to coordinate all club meetings and activities, but then didn’t step in to offer assistance when the club wasn’t meeting. Another youth remembered being extremely disappointed when her club advisor would not let her lead any games or activities for the club after being elected recreation leader.

Focus group participants also discussed over-involved advisors and parents. One youth said that, “Throughout the years I think parents have gotten too involved in the meetings. I know advisors are supposed to help out with the little details, but it always seemed like the parents took over and it was sort of frustrating.” Another youth described her first 4-H club as being “run by advisors.”

At the end of the focus group interviews, participants were asked if there were other things they wanted to share. One participant said that the fair should be more fun
and more about the kids, and not so much about the adults. As such, several youth discussed the need to “do something about the adults” who are involved in the program. One participant shared that, “The adults just go at it. It’s sort of funny to sit back and watch, but it’s the adults that have the issues.”

While many participants described negative experiences with advisors and parents, other youth spoke very positively about their club advisors. Several youth described advisors who were helpful and went out of their way to assist 4-H members. “Making it fun” was also something several participants mentioned when praising their club advisors. One youth discussed how organized her advisor was and how the advisor had very clear schedules for when and where club meetings would be held.

Several minor themes also emerged. Participants mentioned that a lack of fun at 4-H club meetings influenced their decision not to re-enroll in the program. One youth said, “We never actually did anything fun at the meetings.” Other youth discussed the lack of communication and organization in their clubs. One participant stated that he “had next to no idea when most of the meetings were.” Another youth expressed frustration that her 4-H club never met. Because her club never met, she assumed her advisors didn’t care. She left the 4-H club program with the sentiment, “If you don’t really care, I don’t really care.”

Two youth also mentioned that their parents played a key role in their decision not to re-enroll. One participant said that her father told her not to re-enroll because of their family’s busy schedule. Another youth stated that, “I wanted to [re-join], but my mom’s the cross country coach so I had to do that.”
Influence of How the 4-H Club Was Run

Participants were asked to discuss how their 4-H clubs were run. Youth primarily talked about two types of clubs, advisor-run clubs and member-run clubs. Two participants specifically discussed how the president of their clubs would read from the meeting agenda, but then the advisors would communicate all of the information about each agenda item. So, while these clubs gave the illusion of being member-run, they were mainly run by the advisors.

Other youth mentioned the age of their club members as being a factor in their clubs being advisor-run. One participant said that, “Because there were so many young kids, it was hard to have them in charge.” However, other participants described clubs where the club officers ran the meetings. One youth commented, “The kids ran it. The parents sat back and like talked away from the kids.”

Also, two youth discussed their dissatisfaction with the length of their 4-H club meetings. One participant described her meetings as lasting over three hours, while another youth described meetings scheduled for two hours, but meetings which only had enough business and activities to last 30 minutes, therefore leaving club members with nothing to do for over an hour.

Focus group participants also discussed demonstrations within their 4-H clubs. Two youth expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of the demonstrations given by their fellow 4-H club members. One participant said that “A lot of the members in our club, when they did their demonstration, it wasn’t something they actually demonstrated.” This individual expressed frustration that members were permitted to give demonstrations on overly simplistic topics such as how to tie a shoe. Others discussed the benefits of
demonstrations being given in their clubs. Several discussed how helpful it was when club members gave demonstrations related to their project because the demonstrations educated other club members about the various projects available through the 4-H program.

One unique response from a participant expressed frustration about the lack of involvement from club members at 4-H club meetings. In her club experience, many members were not interested and did not wish to participate in the club’s business meeting, but were instead there for the recreation and snacks.

**Experiences with Competition and the Influence of Competition**

Participants were asked to share their experiences with competition through the Erie County 4-H program and to discuss how their experiences with competition influenced their decision not to re-enroll. Many youth described negative experiences with competition during their tenure in 4-H. Several expressed dissatisfaction and frustration over parents completing 4-H projects for their children. One participant shared that “You could tell that some of the kids’ parents did their work because they were completely unprepared but their [display] boards looked amazing.” She continued by saying that “This experience kind of had a bad impact on me because I thought why should I try when I’m going to get a low score for trying my hardest.”

Other youth expressed disappointment stemming from overly competitive adults or adults who exhibited poor sportsmanship during judgings or competitions. One youth stated that “It’s frustrating whenever you put in all of this time and energy into your projects and you do it for fun. You’re supposed to be excited about it and everything and it’s just frustrating when the parents make it so competitive just like over placings. It’s
just a downer because it’s supposed to be fun. Yeah, it’s great when you win first or second, but that’s not everything. It’s about the project itself.”

Participants also discussed other negative experiences with competition, such as judging days and times conflicting with other activities or conflicts with county judging events and state judging events. Another youth discussed how embarrassed she had been when her lamb got away from her during the show.

Still, despite many youth sharing negative experiences with competition, other youth clearly stated that competition had nothing to do with their decision not to re-enroll in the Erie County 4-H program. One youth succinctly stated, “Competition didn’t have anything to do with it [not re-enrolling].” Other youth discussed their positive experiences with competition. One participant said, “I think it [competition] enhances it [4-H]. You get a chance to prove yourself against other people, figure out what you did wrong and what you did right and learn from it.”

**Research Question #2: Barriers to Participation in 4-H**

Study participants were also asked questions developed specifically to discover the barriers that exist that prevent older youth from participating in the Erie County 4-H program. Therefore, the subsequent sections contain findings on the following: (a) youths’ views concerning the problems that exist within the 4-H program and (b) the participants’ participation in activities outside of 4-H.

**The Problems with 4-H**

The former 4-H members were asked about the problems with 4-H. A major theme that emerged was negative judging experiences. Concerns included favoritism in
judging, such as judges awarding higher placings to individuals they knew, at least from
the focus group participants’ perspective. Project success being due to money was
another concern expressed. Youth also shared dissatisfaction stemming from the
organization and scheduling of judging, such as not being given adequate time with a
judge, as well as not being able to attend judgings due to other commitments. Focus
group participants also discussed 4-H being very time consuming. Several expressed
concerns about 4-H interfering with activities such as sports and work.

A minor theme that emerged when discussing the problems associated with 4-H
was negative experiences with advisors and parents. When discussing one of her
advisors, one participant stated that, “We felt uncomfortable around her. You would try
to have a conversation with her and it was like she wasn’t there.” Another youth
discussed how much the adults involved in the program argued, and she expressed her
dissatisfaction with the way the adults “took over.” One youth talked about how rare it
was that her 4-H club met and the lack of guidance and help she received from her club.

Some of the unique responses included a comment about how the project books
were just like doing schoolwork while most kids just want to get away from school in the
summer. One participant also expressed concern for the way 4-H was promoted to the
local community. She stated, “I think it needs to be promoted more. A lot of kids just
think you have to have a farm to have 4-H--you have to take animals, but it’s so much
more than that. There are so many different options.”

Involvement in Activities Outside of 4-H

Participants were asked to describe what other activities they were involved in
while they were involved with 4-H. Many participants described their involvement in the
arts through activities such as choir, band, dance, and theatre. Several other participants described their involvement in athletics, such as swimming, cheerleading, and baseball. Some participants reported that the county fair should be earlier in the summer so it didn’t conflict with the state fair or school sports. One youth stated that, “I just think people sometimes choose sports over 4-H ‘cause it’s within their school and they’re with all their friends they’ve grown up with all their lives, so they’re used to being with those people and they’ve become really close with them. That’s probably why some people choose that.”

Some youth described their involvement in academic or school leadership activities. One individual was taking college classes at the local community college while others were working toward a diploma of distinction or were involved as class officers. Finally, several youth discussed their jobs and the conflicts working created with other activities such as 4-H. One youth stated that her job was very willing to work around her schedule, while another participant stated that, “Since I work two jobs, I basically work everyday and you’re kind of like physically and mentally exhausted and you’re just like I don’t want to do anything but go home and lay down and sleep.”

One unique response included a youth explaining that she was technically still involved in the 4-H program, but just wasn’t a member of a 4-H club. This youth was currently serving as a 4-H CARTEENS instructor. CARTEENS is a 4-H traffic safety program where teens serve as the instructors for their peers who are sentenced to attend the program through the juvenile courts for receiving various traffic offenses. So while this individual was not a member of a traditional 4-H club as she had been in the past, she was still a 4-H member through her involvement in CARTEENS.
Research Question #3: Conditions that Facilitate Participation in 4-H

Youth were also asked questions concerning conditions that would facilitate older youth participation in 4-H. Below are the findings concerning: (a) the reasons youth joined the 4-H program and (b) what youth tell their friends about 4-H.

Reasons I Joined 4-H

Focus group participants were asked to discuss why they joined the Erie County 4-H program. Many youth said that family influenced their decision to join the program. Several had family members who had been members of the program, such as parents, grandparents, or cousins. Some had older siblings who were members of the program when they decided to join. For example, one youth stated that, “I joined 4-H when I was a Cloverbud. My grandparents did it and my parents did it, so did my cousins.”

Many youth said they joined because of their friends, primarily because they had friends who were already involved with the 4-H program. Finally, a few said they joined because they wanted to get involved with a group of kids and because they wanted to learn new things and because it sounded like fun.

What I Tell My Friends About 4-H

Participants were asked what they tell their friends about 4-H. Many talked about the importance of selecting the right club. Several youth discussed picking a club that was a match in terms of project interests. One participant said how jealous she was of her friend’s club because it always sounded like so much more fun than her club.

Also, participants said that they tell their friends about the projects available through the 4-H program. Two youth mentioned that they would have liked 4-H to offer projects in music, while several other youth talked about how they felt 4-H should be
better promoted. Participants felt many in the community think that 4-H is just for farm kids. One youth said that, “They [my friends] think it’s [4-H] just for younger kids, but I explained to them that there’s a lot more to 4-H than just animals and going to the barn and getting dirty all the time. There’s a lot of projects.”

Several youth also stated that they tell friends that the club meetings are boring. One participant felt that the meetings were fun for the advisors, but not for the members. Another youth said she warns her friends about all of the “parental drama.”

Many participants said they tell their friends very positive things about the program, such as how much fun it is and how it can make you more responsible. A few tell their friends how much fun the county fair is.

One participant felt the Extension Office should provide more help to youth whose clubs have disbanded, while other youth felt they should start a 4-H program for older youth who are too old to join the current program. Two participants discussed how they missed being a part of the 4-H program. One stated that, “I really miss it. I love washing and shearing sheep. It’s really fun bonding with my animals.”

Themes Across Research Questions

There were a few themes that emerged across research questions. These themes included: (a) experiences with advisors, (b) experiences with competition, and (c) conflicts with other activities.

Experiences with Advisors

While some youth discussed positive relationships with their club advisors, many youth discussed inappropriate behavior exhibited by adults and parents, uninvolved and
unsupportive advisors, as well as advisors who were overly involved. The relationship between a club advisor and a member clearly had an influence on a youth’s satisfaction with their club, and their satisfaction with the 4-H program as a whole. 4-H club advisors also play a pivotal role in establishing how a 4-H club will function, which in turn affects youth satisfaction with the club, and again, with the entire 4-H program.

**Experiences with Competition**

Negative judging experiences was also a theme that was evident across research questions. While some participants described positive experiences with competition, many youth described perceived favoritism during judging, unclear expectations for judgings, problems with organization during judging, and poor sportsmanship exhibited during competition. Project judging is the capstone experience for most 4-H youth because it provides youth with the opportunity to share what they have learned through their project work. Therefore, it makes sense that perceived negative experiences with judging would influence a youth’s decision whether or not to re-enroll in the 4-H program.

**Conflicts with Other Activities**

Finally, participation in other activities was a theme found across research questions. Several participants said that 4-H was time consuming and interfered with other activities in which they were involved. Because of the importance our society places on organized sports and other activities and because of the demands placed on youth who are involved in these activities it is not surprising that youth feel pressure to make a choice between these activities and involvement in 4-H.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The overall purpose of this study was to investigate the retention of older 4-H youth in the Erie County 4-H program. The objectives were to gain a clearer understanding of several issues: (a) why older youth choose not to re-enroll in the Erie County 4-H Youth Development program; (b) what the barriers are to participation in the 4-H program for Erie County older youth; and (c) what the conditions are that would facilitate participation in the Erie County 4-H program. This chapter discusses the findings of the study; limitations; and implications for theory, future research, and practice.

Study Summary

For years, 4-H has struggled with the complex problems of membership retention, especially among older youth. However, little research has been done concerning why 4-H members choose to leave the program. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the retention of older 4-H youth. Specifically, the study sought to investigate the reasons older youth choose not to re-enroll in the Erie County 4-H program. Specific objectives of the study were to: (a) explore the reasons why youth chose not to re-enroll
in the Erie County 4-H Youth Development program, (b) identify the barriers to participation in the 4-H program for Erie County youth, and (c) determine what conditions would facilitate participation in the Erie County 4-H program.

The study was grounded in two specific theoretical frameworks. First, from the perspective of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Theory, the environment in which youth development occurs is viewed as a set of nested contexts ranging from families and peer groups to the culture and government; the theory proposes a series of hypotheses about how these contexts or systems interact. In the current study, the focus was on the way in which factors in the different environments impacted a youth’s 4-H experience and hence their decision not to re-enroll in the Erie County 4-H program.

The second theoretical framework was Csikszentmihalyi’s Theory of Flow which contends that when individuals experience meaningful challenges that are matched to their skills, they experience sustained enjoyment or “flow” which is repeated each time they participate in the activity. Hence, this enjoyment of challenge is self-reinforcing and creates the desire to repeat the experience (Larson et al., 2004). Therefore, according to this theory, if youth do not feel challenged through their 4-H experience, they will not wish to repeat the experience and will likely choose to discontinue their involvement with the program.

To address the research questions, a qualitative study was designed to explore factors related to youth discontinuing their involvement with the Erie County 4-H program. Sixteen youth participated in one of three focus groups held to gather data to answer the research questions. Focus group participants consisted of Erie County youth who were ages 11 to 17 during the 2007 4-H program year who were enrolled in 4-H in
an Erie County community 4-H club in 2007, but who did not re-enroll in a community 4-H club in 2008. The study did not include 4-H members enrolled only in 4-H through their involvement in 4-H school enrichment or special emphasis programs as of the same dates.

Erie County’s 4-H member database was used to obtain a listing of the names, addresses, and phone numbers of youth ages 12 to 18 in 2008 who were members of Erie County 4-H in 2007, but who did not re-enroll for 2008. From this list, individuals were contacted through their parent or guardian by the researcher and invited to participate in one of three focus group interviews for the purpose of investigating the reasons older youth do no re-enroll in the Erie County 4-H program.

Significant findings from the study concerning the retention of older 4-H youth related to: (a) experiences with advisors, (b) experiences with competition, and (c) conflicts with other activities. While some youth discussed positive relationships with their club advisors, many youth discussed inappropriate behavior exhibited by adults and parents, uninvolved and unsupportive advisors, as well as advisors who were overly involved. The findings of the study clearly revealed that the relationship between a club advisor and a member had an influence on a youth’s satisfaction with their club, and their satisfaction with the 4-H program as a whole, and hence their decision not to re-enroll.

Negative judging experiences was also established as a theme across research questions. While some participants described positive experiences with competition, many youth described perceived favoritism during judging, unclear expectations for judgings, problems with organization during judging, and poor sportsmanship exhibited during competition.
Participation in other activities was also a theme found across research questions. Several participants said that 4-H was time consuming and interfered with other activities in which they were involved, which influenced their decision not to re-enroll.

Finally, in terms of conditions that facilitate participation, many youth discussed family members as being influential in their decision to join the 4-H program, so family members would likely also be influential in a young person’s decision to re-enroll in the program. The involvement of friends also appeared to facilitate continued participation, as youth were more likely to re-enroll in the program if their friends were also active in the program.

**Discussion**

Results from the study indicated that negative experiences with 4-H club advisors and negative judging experiences may be “pushing” youth out of the 4-H program, while the lure of participation in other activities may be “pulling” youth from 4-H and propelling them to pursue other interests, such as athletics and the arts. Figure 5.1 describes what is happening regarding the retention of older 4-H youth, based on the themes derived from this study’s data. While making the decision to pursue certain activities and to discontinue involvement in other activities is a normal part of healthy adolescent development, county 4-H programs should pay particular attention to factors that are pushing youth out of local 4-H programs in an attempt to more effectively meet the needs of older youth. Effectively meeting the needs of older youth may therefore make participation in 4-H just as appealing, if not more appealing, than participation in other activities.
Figure 5.1: A conceptual model: The retention of older 4-H youth

- Participation in Athletics
- Decision to Discontinue Involvement in 4-H
- Participation in the Arts

PUSH

- Experiences with Advisors
- Experiences with Competition

PULL

4-H Member
**Experiences with Advisors**

Results from this study indicated that one of the primary reasons youth did not re-enroll in the Erie County 4-H program was because of negative experiences with advisors. The large volume and variety of discussion in the current study related to participants’ experiences, both positive and negative, with club advisors reflects the central role that these adults play in organizing and setting the climate of 4-H clubs.

The literature on attachment, social development, and social control all highlight the importance of connectedness to non-parental adults in the positive development of adolescents and therefore support the findings of the current study. While the literature supports the notion that providing youth with positive, non-parental relationships can be a powerful preventative and stabilizer, the literature also reveals that a negative role model can be destabilizing (Grossman & Bulle, 2006). Dworkin and Larson (2006) concluded that one of the most frequent types of negative experiences in youth activities was aversive behavior attributed to the adult leaders of the activities.

Similar conclusions have also been made when studying youth sports programs. A study by Hansen, Larson, and Dworkin (2003) reported high rates of inappropriate adult behavior in sports activities, while research on mentoring and youth sports suggests that a single negative experience with a mentor or coach often has proportionally more influence on that relationship than a single positive experience (Rhodes, 2002). As such, the results of the current study lends support to the literature, which contends that youth are unlikely to remain involved in a program where they have not established positive relationships with adults.
In addition, in the current study, several youth discussed advisors who were unsupportive or uninvolved. Likewise, Gambone and Arbreton (1997) found that positive relationships between adults and youth were a major factor motivating youth to continue their participation in an after-school program, while Walker and Arbreton (2004) found that the most significant predictor of youth program participation was the number of adults who the youth felt supported them. Similarly, in a study of a 4-H after-school program, Paisley and Ferrari (2005) reported that youth with higher levels of attendance were also those with more positive relationships with the adults in the program. According to Grossman and Bulle (2006), programs that pay attention to enhancing adult-youth relationships within their curriculum improve attendance rates among participants and increase the potency of their outcomes.

When specifically comparing the current study with other studies concerning the retention of 4-H youth, there is a good deal of congruency regarding the important role of adult advisors in the retention of 4-H youth. Heinsohn and Lewis (1995) contended that teens who choose to participate in youth organizations often do so because of the support provided by the staff and adult leaders. Quite simply, they like the adult or what the adult is providing. In addition, Hartley (1993) found that 4-H club leaders with higher rates of first-year member re-enrollment also received more positive ratings for leader effectiveness than did club advisors with lower re-enrollment rates, which also clearly supports the findings in the current study. Finally, Ferrari and Turner (2006) concluded that continued participation in a 4-H afterschool program was due, at least in part, to the positive relationships between youth and adult staff members.
However, several previous studies did not support the findings of the current study concerning the importance of relationships between advisors and members. The 1993 study by Norland and Bennett found a very low relationship between advisor participation and satisfaction with 4-H. However, the study did find high quality club meetings to be highly related to member satisfaction. This is interesting because club advisors clearly have an impact on the quality of 4-H club meetings. Although a study by Ritchie and Resler (1993) concerning why youth drop out of 4-H did not discuss the relationship between experiences with adult advisors and 4-H member retention, it did reveal that the most frequent reason given by youth for dropping out of 4-H related to displeasure with 4-H clubs. It should be noted that it is possible that in these studies, experiences with adults truly did play an important role in members’ satisfaction with 4-H and their decision to re-enroll in the program, as experiences with adult advisors likely contributed to youths’ dissatisfaction with their 4-H club because advisors play such an integral role in the club.

In conclusion, this study supported the notion that adult leaders play a critically important role in the experiences young people have in programs and organization such as 4-H. Through this study, youth discussed their encounters, both positive and negative, with their 4-H club advisors, and it was evident these experiences impacted the participants’ decision not to re-enroll in the 4-H program.

Experiences with Competition

Results from this study indicated that one of the primary reasons youth did not re-enroll in the Erie County 4-H program was because of negative experiences with competition. Competition has been a part of 4-H since its beginnings in the early 20th
century, and 4-H has traditionally used competitive events and activities to promote learning and skills development in its members.

While the current study clearly found negative experiences with competition to be a factor in youth’s decision not to re-enroll in the program, many focus group participants discussed positive experiences with competition. Other studies regarding competition also suggest both positive and negative influences of competition on young people’s development (Festsch & Yang, 2002; Keith & Vaughn, 1998; Radhakrishna, Everhart, & Sinasky, 2006).

While research on competition in 4-H is rather limited, a 2006 study by Radhakrishna, Everhart, and Sinasky found that 4-H participants have positive attitudes about 4-H competitive events. The study revealed that youth perceived competitive events as helping them to learn new things, develop life skills, set goals, and strive for excellence.

Despite some discussion related to positive experiences with competition in the current study, many negative outcomes related to competition were evident as youth discussed unfair practices, such as favoritism in judging and parents completing 4-H project work. Poor sportsmanship was also discussed in the current study, as well as improper parental behavior related to competition.

Unlike the current study, little research on 4-H retention has found competition to be a factor in youth’s decision not to re-enroll in the 4-H program. However, a 1992 study by Cano and Bankston that explored factors associated with participation and nonparticipation of ethnic minority youth in the Ohio 4-H program identified inequality of judging experiences as a factor in the participation of minority youth in 4-H.
Similarly, a more recent study by Radhakrishna, Everhart, and Sinasky (2006) that investigated youths’ perceptions of competitive 4-H events found youth to be somewhat concerned with excessive parent involvement, unethical practices, and unhealthy characteristics that are prevalent in competitive events. However, it should be noted that in this same study, several youth also reported many positive effects of competition as well. Therefore, while negative experiences with competitive 4-H activities was found to be a major theme in the current study, the majority of previous studies have not identified competition as a factor in the retention of older 4-H youth. In conclusion, while several youth discussed positive experiences with competition through the Erie County 4-H program, the current study clearly revealed negative experiences with competition as influencing a youth’s decision to re-enroll in the program. Such mixed results warrant further investigation.

**Conflicts with Other Activities**

Results of the current study revealed that while factors such as negative experiences with advisors and negative experiences with competition are *pushing* young people out of the 4-H program, opportunities for participation in other activities are *pulling* youth out of the 4-H program and into other pursuits, such as athletics and the arts. Why are youth leaving 4-H to participate in these other programs?

According to Chaskin and Baker (2006), relatively little research is available that focuses on the determinants of young people’s participation in out-of-school-time activities. A study by Fredricks et al. (2002) sought to understand the factors that influenced adolescents’ commitment to extracurricular activities over time. Findings revealed that the two most common reasons adolescents participated in athletics and the
arts was that they were good at it and their friends were involved. Similarly, in the current study, when one young man was asked why he had chosen to participate in baseball while choosing not to continue his 4-H participation, the boy simply stated that he was good at baseball while he hadn’t been very good at 4-H. Likewise, youth in the current study continually stated that a reason they joined 4-H was because their friends were involved in the program. When describing the factors that led to his discontinuing involvement with the 4-H program, another young man revealed that after his first 4-H club disbanded, he joined a club where he didn’t know anyone and didn’t have any friends. He subsequently dropped out of the program. Therefore, the current study supports the research that contends youth participate in activities at which they excel and in which their friends are involved.

Although conflicts with other activities, such as athletics and the arts, are typically viewed as a common reason that youth discontinue their involvement with the 4-H program, this has not been well documented in previous research. The current study found that conflicts with other activities were indeed a major factor in the retention of older 4-H youth, but only two previous studies specifically involving 4-H youth have found conflicts with other activities as influencing re-enrollment (Lauxman, 2002; Ritchie & Resler, 1993). In addition, although conflicts with other activities have widely been assumed to influence the retention of older 4-H youth, it has certainly not been a well studied topic. Given the findings of the current research, it appears to warrant further investigation.
Limitations

The sample used in this study was limited to those who agreed to participate from the list of youth who were Erie County 4-H club members ages 11 to 17 in 2007 but who did not re-enroll in the 4-H club program during the 2008 program year. While the data obtained were rich data, the results cannot be generalized beyond the group who participated in the study. However, although only three focus groups involving 16 former 4-H club members were held, the individuals who participated were a fairly representative group in terms of age and years in 4-H. Furthermore, these data are believed to be valid, because steps were put into place for a peer review analysis. In order to reach a broader population, a different research method, such as a survey, would need to be used. A survey method would allow former 4-H club members to provide information about their experiences at their own discretion. Also, the research method used in the current study was useful in gaining depth of the subject, but not breadth across a variety of participants.

Implications

This study has several implications for theory, future research, and practice.

Implications for Theory

Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Theory of Human Development (1979) is useful for understanding the 4-H club experience. This model helps us realize the importance of roles, activities, and interpersonal relationships within the microsystem. Furthermore, the model helps us recognize how the other systems within the ecological model interact with
one another in an effort to create positive or negative experiences for youth within 4-H club delivery system.

We can also use Csikszentmihalyi’s Theory of Flow to discuss how the 4-H club experience is related to the retention of older 4-H youth. According to Csikszentmihalyi, when individuals experience meaningful challenges that are matched to their skills, they experience sustained enjoyment or “flow,” which is repeated each time they participate in the activity, which in turn creates the desire to repeat the experience. Csikszentmihalyi’s Theory of Flow helps us recognize the importance of providing meaningful, challenging experiences for youth within the context of their 4-H experience and most specifically, within their 4-H club. This is especially important since some youth indicated they are not being challenged through their participation in 4-H.

As such, Csikszentmihalyi’s Theory of Flow helps us realize how youth who are members of leader-directed clubs or youth who have adult advisors who are uninvolved or unsupportive may become discouraged and chose not to re-enroll in the program. These types of club experiences do not provide challenges for the youth involved and therefore do not create the desire to repeat the experience.

One unique response during the focus group interviews came from a young lady who revealed that while she had chosen to discontinue her involvement with the 4-H club program, she remained a 4-H member because of her involvement with the 4-H CARTEENS program, which is a leadership development program where teens are responsible for the development and implementation of a traffic safety program for their peers. The question then becomes, what prompted this teen to remain in the 4-H CARTEENS program but to discontinue her involvement in her 4-H club? The answer
likely, at least in part, lies within Csikszentmihalyi’s Theory of Flow. This young lady probably remained involved in the 4-H CARTEENS program because, unlike her former 4-H club, 4-H CARTEENS provided this youth with meaningful, challenging experiences with a small group of other teens.

Further evidence of the applicability of Csikszentmihalyi’s Theory of Flow comes when we examine Erie County’s 4-H camp counselors. Of the 27 youth who served as 4-H camp counselor in 2008, 21 were current 4-H club members, while one had never been involved in the 4-H club program, and four were former Erie County 4-H club members. Again, it is another example of youth choosing to participate in 4-H leadership experiences, such as 4-H CARTEENS and camp counselor programs, while choosing to discontinue their involvement in the 4-H club program because these experiences provide them with meaningful, challenging activities with a small group of other teens.

Finally, Csikszentmihalyi’s Theory of Flow views intrinsic motivation as growing out of the experience of challenge. The theory contends that youth who are challenged through their participation in an activity will be intrinsically motivated to continue participation in that activity. While the current study found youth chose to discontinue their participation in 4-H due, in part, to their negative experiences with competition, a study by Ames (1981) contended that competition usually involves external, not internal, motivation. The study found that while winning in a competitive setting produced evidence of increased self-worth, losing lowered children’s self-perceptions of their ability and feelings of satisfaction. Findings by Ames (1981), as well as findings of the current study lend support to the notion that competition emphasizes social comparisons which influences motivation.
Implications for Future Research

The study generated additional questions to be explored that would add to the body of research about the retention of older 4-H youth. First, the current study could be replicated in other counties to see if the major themes are consistent across counties. This would address the limitation of the small sample size in the current study, as it is possible that given the sample size, the many reasons youth choose not to re-enroll may not all have been identified. Next, based on the findings of the present study and possibly subsequent studies in other counties, a survey research study could be designed to ask older youth who chose not to re-enroll in the 4-H program questions about their experiences. Themes generated from this study could form the basis for questions on such a survey. A survey would allow more former 4-H members to participate, which would create additional data and help researchers learn more about why older youth chose to discontinue their involvement in the 4-H program.

As such, a similar study should be performed with older youth who are current 4-H members, as current members may also be having negative experiences through the 4-H program. Current members are enrolled in some of the same 4-H clubs as those who participated in the focus groups interviews, and current members were evaluated at the same judging events and activities as those who chose not to re-enroll. Current members may also be experiencing the push stemming from negative experiences with adults and negative experiences with competition and are very likely experiencing the pull of participation in other activities; however, they have chosen to remain involved. What is it that is keeping these members in the 4-H program, while many of their peers are clearly
choosing to discontinue involvement? What is it that tips that balance for some, but not for others?

Because some of the negative experiences related to advisors, another area of research that needs to be addressed is how 4-H club volunteers are trained. Research questions could look at the content of the types of training being done in counties and how that training prepares volunteers to provide a positive club experiences for 4-H members. Do club advisors recognize the importance of allowing members to lead the club? Are they skilled in techniques to do so? Do 4-H club advisors realize the value of providing challenges within the 4-H club that match the skills of the members in the club? A study directed to the volunteers who facilitate 4-H clubs could address these questions.

Finally, this study clearly demonstrates the importance of youth’s experiences with competition in their decision to re-enroll in the 4-H program. Further investigation should be done concerning how experiences with competition are related to the decision to re-enroll.

**Implications for Practice**

This study has several implications for practice. First, 4-H Extension professionals need to help club advisors and other 4-H volunteers develop better practices in working with older 4-H youth. The literature (Larson, Hansen, & Walker, 2005) suggests several practices to use when working with young people in order to develop positive relationships between youth and adult leaders including:
1. *Following youths’ lead* – 4-H volunteers should follow the direction and goals set by club members and should be encouraged to work with youth rather than to simply do things for them. The technique of following youths’ lead not only builds youth ownership, but requires considerable restraint from club advisors.

2. *Asking guiding questions* – Club advisors should intentionally ask club members questions that help clarify suggestions or filter out ideas. Questioning also helps youth evaluate whether a proposed idea would be appropriate, fun, or interesting.

3. *Provide intermediate structures.* When members are having difficulty, adult leaders need to intervene to some extent. Helping members put jobs and tasks into manageable steps to reach realistic goals and deadlines is an example of intervening. The balancing act is to know when to intervene and doing so in a way that is developmentally appropriate and does not undermine youth ownership.

4. *Monitor to keep youth on track.* Methods of monitoring include observing and asking questions, and supporting through behind-the-scenes tasks. Checking up on the progress of members is another way of monitoring. Intervening in more direct ways may be required to keep some members on track. Monitoring requires careful intervention to ensure that adults support rather than undercut youth ownership.

The challenge for 4-H professionals becomes how to teach 4-H volunteers to use the practices described above. Simply telling them they should institute the practices will not
produce the desired results. Matching experienced advisors with those who need to develop these skills could be another strategy.

In addition, 4-H professionals need to be aware of the importance that youth’s experiences with competition play in their overall experience with the program. Professionals should be encouraged to develop ways to reward cooperation, not just competition, especially for youth who do not thrive in a competitive environment. Professionals who work with the 4-H program should provide training opportunities for volunteers concerning ways to foster a sense of healthy competition within the club setting. Club advisors and parents should be encouraged to provide their unconditional support to children, whether they win the blue ribbon or walk away without a ribbon.

Although many studies, including the current study, have demonstrated that youth often leave the 4-H program in order to participate in other activities, such as athletics and the arts, a study by Lerner, Lerner, and Phelps (2008) found that for boys and girls, combining sports and youth development programs was one of the most effective ways to promote positive development and prevent problems. This leads to the conclusion that instead of encouraging youth to choose between participation in athletics and participation in 4-H, perhaps 4-H professionals should be looking for ways in which youth can participate in both.

Mahoney, Larson, Eccles, and Lord (2005) contended that programs that are successful at retaining their adolescent members offer increasing opportunities for leadership, decision-making, and meaningful service. In other words, they offer opportunities that fit the maturing adolescents’ sense of self and expertise. Likewise, a study by Hansen and Larson (2007) found that having a leadership role in a youth
development activity is correlated with spending more time in that activity and higher
intrinsic motivation. Consequently, the youth in leadership roles were found to have
greater immersion and investment in the program activity, and thus were more likely to
learn from the activity. Likewise, in an effort to retain youth, 4-H programs should strive
to offer a variety of programming opportunities for older youth that promote leadership
development, allow for decision-making, and provide opportunities for service. Program
variety would encourage and allow youth to move in and out of different programs within
the 4-H program. However, it is important to note that in many counties, 4-H leadership
opportunities such as camp counseling, CARTEENS, and Junior Leadership are not
available to youth until they reach 14 or 15 years of age, while studies show that youth
begin dropping out of the program at increased rates around the age of 12. Perhaps 4-H
programs should look at offering intermediary leadership opportunities for youth ages 12
to 14 to ensure that they remain engaged and challenged through their 4-H participation.

In addition, a more systematic way of following up with older youth who chose
not to re-enroll in the 4-H program should be put into practice. Given that every county
in Ohio uses the same database system to track 4-H membership, generating a list of
potential participants would not be difficult. A statewide evaluation instrument should be
created so that the same set of data is collected from each county. By doing this, 4-H
Extension professionals can learn why older 4-H youth are choosing not to re-enroll in
the 4-H program. This type of evaluation would also provide information concerning
which counties are doing a good job of retaining older members and which counties may
need to make adjustments in programming. Overall, such a system would strengthen the
Ohio 4-H program.
Finally, a study by Marcazk, Dworkin, Skuza, and Beyer (2006) found that in youth programming, teens, as well as parents, consistently advocated for flexibility, less structure, and more leisure with small groups of friends who shared a specific interest. Their data revealed that the “structure” in structured programs was often a barrier to participation. Similarly, according to Anderson-Butcher (2005) youth development professionals must balance less structured strategies that are critical for recruitment and retention with those that are more outcome focused. Therefore, 4-H professionals must consider how to provide fun, engaging activities while simultaneously engaging youth in more structured programs that enhance competencies in domains that are important for healthy development. However, providing less structured activities within a 4-H program which most individuals would define as structured by nature will present many challenges for 4-H professionals and 4-H volunteers. The key may lie in providing more choice and more developmentally appropriate, structured opportunities within the structure of our 4-H program.

In conclusion, the findings of the current study on the retention of older 4-H youth have many implications for practice including: (a) helping club advisors and other 4-H volunteers understand and practice strategies to improve the way in which they work with older 4-H youth, (b) developing ways to reward cooperation, not just competition, as well as provide training opportunities for volunteers concerning fostering a sense of healthy competition within the club setting for members, as well as parents, (c) developing strategies that can help youth become successful in both 4-H and other activities, such as athletics and the arts, (d) offering a variety of programming opportunities for leadership, decision-making, and meaningful service for older 4-H
youth, and (e) giving youth what they want by offering some programs that have flexibility, less structure, and more leisure with small groups of friends who shared a specific interest.

Interestingly, most youth in the current study stated that when they discontinued their participation in 4-H, they replaced their participation in 4-H with involvement in some other activity or increased their participation in another activity. In short, they did not simply drop-out to do nothing. So, while participation in most youth programs tends to decline as youth age, and many contend that it should be expected that youth will move in and out of programs depending on their on-going development, changing interests, and continual search for self, the current study supports the notion that there are indeed programmatic changes that can be made to help retain older youth in 4-H programs.

Conclusions

The current study focused on the retention of older 4-H members within the Erie County 4-H program. It comes at a time when the number of opportunities for youth seems to be at an all-time high and youth development programs seem to be competing for youths’ time participation. In addition, programs such as 4-H youth development are currently being held more accountable for program outcomes as financial and staffing resources decrease. However, professionals must realize that their programs cannot achieve the desired impact if youth do not remain involved in 4-H programming.
Youth join the 4-H program for a number of reasons, including a family history with the program and because they have friends that are involved. Even former members said they enjoyed meeting new people and making new friends through 4-H, and they enjoyed the wide variety of projects available to them through the program. Youth choose not to re-enroll in the program for many reasons, including conflicts with other activities and negative experiences with people and with the program. An underlying theme throughout the entire study was the impact that adult leaders and positive and negative experiences with competition have on 4-H youth.

Who best to ask why older youth leave the 4-H program than the youth themselves? Listening to their voices will help us develop and improve our programs so that these youth are not “here today, gone tomorrow.”
REFERENCES


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APPENDIX A

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONING ROUTE

1. Think back to before you joined the Erie County 4-H program. What caused you to join 4-H?
2. What did you enjoy about 4-H?
3. What are the problems with 4-H?
4. Describe the reasons that caused you not to re-enroll in 4-H?
5. How did your experience with your 4-H club influence your decision not to re-enroll?
   a. Describe your 4-H club advisor(s).
      i. What did you 4-H advisor(s) do?
      ii. Describe the ways that your 4-H advisor(s) assisted 4-H members.
   b. Describe how your 4-H club meetings were run.
      i. How were club members involved in running the meetings?
      ii. What types of things did you do during the club meetings?
6. Describe the competitive activities in which you participated while you were a 4-H member.
a. How did your experience with competition influence your decision not to re-enroll?

7. When you were in 4-H, in what other activities were you involved?
   a. How did those other activities influence your involvement with 4-H?
   b. How does having a job influence your involvement with 4-H?
   c. How involved are you in other activities now that you are no longer in 4-H?

8. What do you tell your friends about 4-H?

9. What other thing would you like to say that you have not had the chance to share?
Hello, may I please speak to (parents’ name)?

If the person is not home:

When would be a good time to reach (him/her)?

If the person is home:

My name is Mary Beth Albright, and I’m calling from Ohio State University Extension. Your (son/daughter), (name) was enrolled in the Erie County 4-H program in 2007, but did not enroll in 2008. We’re holding some small group discussions in our area to discuss why youth choose not to re-enroll in the 4-H program and I want to offer your (son/daughter) the opportunity to be part of one of those groups. This is a group interview that would last about an hour, and we would provide a pizza party for your son/daughter following the discussion. We will also provide a ten dollar Sandusky Mall gift certificate to your son/daughter for their participation. There would just be this one meeting. We will not try to sell you or you son/daughter anything during this meeting and we will not try to convince them to become involved in 4-H again.

Can I tell you a little more about this?

If yes:
First of all, the sessions that we’re trying to set up are on (days) at (times). Would one of those fit into your schedule?

If the individual is not available:

Thank you for your time.

If the individual is available:

We want to find out more about why youth choose not to re-enroll in the Erie County 4-H program. Right now, we’re trying to put together a group of young people who were Erie County 4-H members in 2007, but who are not members this year.

We are especially interested in why older youth choose to discontinue their involvement in the 4-H program. We hope to use this information to improve our programming efforts. But all of that is in the future. Right now, this small group discussion will be one session which will last for just one hour. Again, we won’t try to sell you or your son or daughter anything, and we won’t try to sign you up for anything else. Does this sound like it would work for you?

The session would be at the Erie County Services Center on Columbus Avenue in Sandusky, and, you would have your choice of dates (dates). We would start at 6:00 p.m. and end by 7:00 p.m. If I do put your son or daughter’s name down, it’s very important that we have everyone show up. Do you think your son or daughter can come? It’s also very important that your son or daughter be there by 6:00 p.m.; will your son or daughter have any problem arriving by 6:00 p.m.?

We’ll be serving pizza and drinks after the group interviews beginning at approximately 7:00 p.m.
The group itself will consist of six to nine other young people, all of whom were enrolled in the Erie County 4-H program in 2007, but who were not enrolled in 2008. Most of the time your son or daughter is at the group interview, they’ll be talking with other young people in a group discussion.

We will be recording the session so that we have a good sense of what people said. We will keep that recording, and anything your son or daughter says, completely confidential. We don’t expect anybody to be saying anything too alarming, but even so, our first priority is to protect participants’ privacy.

Also, I want to emphasize that once your son or daughter comes to the session, anything they say or do there will be completely voluntary, and they’ll be free to leave at any time for any reason.

I’d like to mail you a letter confirming your son or daughter’s participation in this focus group, along with some forms you will need to sign and bring with you to the focus group sessions, and a map telling you how to get to the Erie County Services Center. Is the best address to send that to (recite address from 4-H database)?

So everyone remembers, we will be calling you back the day before the group to remind you about it. Is this the best number to reach you at if we call on (day before group)?

Thank you very much. We look forward to seeing your son or daughter on (date).
APPENDIX C

CONFIRMATION LETTER

Participant’s Name
Address 1
Address 2

Date

To the Parents or Guardian of (Youth’s Name):

Thank you for agreeing to allow (name) to participate in the focus group that is being held on (date) at (time) at the Erie County Services Center, located at 2900 Columbus Avenue in Sandusky. Enclosed with this letter is a map and directions that show you how to get to the (location). We will be meeting in the (room, etc.)

As explained in our earlier telephone call, the purpose of this group is to discuss why youth choose not to re-enroll in the Erie County 4-H Youth Development program. Your child will be part of a group of six to nine youth from the local area who were listed as enrolled in the 4-H program in 2007, but who did not re-enroll in 2008. We know that young people have many reasons for choosing to end their participation in the 4-H program, and we are very interested in hearing your child’s thoughts on this subject.

The session will begin at 6:00 p.m. and will end at 7:00 p.m. We know how valuable your time is, and we will respect everyone’s schedules by both starting and ending on time. So, please allow yourself enough time to reach the Erie County Services Center by 6:00 p.m.

We will provide your son or daughter with a pizza party following the group interviews for their participation. We will also be providing your son or daughter with a $10.00 gift to the Sandusky Mall card for their participation. As we told you in our telephone conversation, we will be recording the discussion so that we can keep a careful record of
the things that we hear from the group members. We will, as promised, take every step to maintain your son or daughter’s privacy.

Once again, we are glad you have permitted your son or daughter to participate in this group. Of course, the success of any group depends on each of its members, so we are counting on you. If your child cannot attend for any reason, please call us at 419/627-7631 as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

Mary Beth Albright
Project Director
INTRODUCTION FOR FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

Good evening and welcome to our session. Thank you for taking the time to talk to us about your experiences with the Erie County 4-H program. My name is Debbie Brown. Assisting me tonight is Mary Beth Albright. We are gathering information about why young people do not re-enroll in the Erie County 4-H program. You were selected because you were all enrolled in the Erie County 4-H program in 2007, but you did not enroll in 2008.

Tonight we will be discussing your participation in the Erie County 4-H program. This includes reasons why you joined and reasons why you chose to discontinue your involvement. There are no right or wrong answers. Please feel free to share your point of view, even if it differs from what others have said.

Before we begin let me share some very simple ground rules. Only one person should be speaking at a time. We are audio recording the session because we do not want to miss any of your comments. If several of you are talking at the same time, the recording will become garbled and we will miss your comments. We will call each other by our first names tonight, but in our later reports, there will not be any names associated
with comments. Keep in mind we are just as interested in negative comments as positive ones, and at sometimes we learn more from the negative comments.

Our session will last one hour. We will not be taking any formal breaks. The rest rooms are out the door and to your left. Feel free to leave the table to use the restroom. We just ask that you do so quietly and that you do so one at a time. We have placed name cards on the table in front of you to help us remember each other’s names.

I am going to ask the first question differently from the rest of the questions. I will ask the first question, then pause to allow you to think about the question. Everyone will have the opportunity to respond to the first questions. After this first question, anyone may respond to any question or discussion at any time.

Let’s begin.