

**COLLEGE ASPIRATIONS OF
MONTANA 4-H YOUTH**

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Introduction and Theoretical Framework

4-H has a history of striving to improve the lives of youth by developing leadership life skills and providing the support needed to allow youth to succeed. Leadership life skills were categorized in the 4-H program into seven categories: decision making, relationships, learning, management, understanding self, group processes and communications. (Bruce, Herring & Briers, 2004) By helping youth gain skills and confidence, they will aspire to become competent, contributing adults after high school. This may include attending a university, completing a technology school or joining the military.

The majority of youth in the Montana 4-H program come from rural areas. Studies done on the aspirations of rural youth have found that the rural experience can be very rewarding (Howley, 2005) and almost all of rural students aspire to continue their education after high school (Bajema, Miller & Williams, 2002). However, students in rural communities felt that financial resources were the largest barrier to attaining a post-secondary education. (Ferry, 2006)

The objective of this study was to determine the post-secondary aspirations of Montana 4-H members and the factors influencing or predicting these aspirations. The study also analyzed the youth's perception of their school and community.

Methodology

Youth selected for the study were those attending Montana 4-H Congress, a summer teen conference, during 2007. Participants in Montana 4-H Congress represent youth from all across the state. A total of 265 youth were surveyed for a response rate of 66.8% of participants.

The survey instrument was modeled after a study done by Bajema, et al. (2002) and consisted of 27 questions. The first section included questions about the youth's plans following high school. The second section included demographic questions. The third section inquired about the youth's perception of their community and where they see themselves in the future. The final section included questions on academic, family and community background of the youth.

Findings

The survey respondents were 63.8% female and 36.2% male. Ethnicity revealed 93.3% white, 2.76% Native American, 1.97% other, 1.57% Hispanic and less than a whole percent were Asian, Pacific Islander or African-American. The mean age was 16 and the average grade level respondents were entering the following fall was grade 11. The average number of siblings was 2.08, and respondents were split relating to birth order; 35.7% indicated they were the eldest, 35.0% were the youngest, 24.3% were a middle child and 4.9% were an only child. Sixty-one percent lived on a farm or ranch of more than 5 acres and 20% in a house in town.

When queried about education plans after high school, 69.7% indicated they planned to attend a 4 year college or university; only 1.2% indicated they did not plan any additional education. On a scale of 1 (unlikely) to 7 (certainly), the respondents mean was 6.07 showing that youth showed a strong predilection for attending college.

Forty-nine percent felt their community was a good place to live and 38.7% thought it was a great place to live. When asked about their high school education 40.6% thought it was good in academic quality and 34.6% thought it was great. Over 35% thought they would be living over 200 miles away from their current location by age 30, and 34.4% thought they would be living within 75 miles at the same age.

TABLE 1: Frequency of Responses Related to Background and Education.

	YES	NO
I am the son or daughter of a farmer or rancher	65.9%	34.1%
One or more of my grandparents were farmers or ranchers	84.9%	15.1%
I have taken agriculture courses in school in high school	48.6%	51.4%
I have taken a technical drawing or shop class in high school	66.2%	33.8%
I have taken chemistry or physics or both	54.1%	45.9%
I have taken calculus or geometry or trigonometry	73.3%	23.7%
I have taken one or more foreign language classes.	69.8%	30.2%
I participated in a drama production or an academic team competition	64.7%	35.3%
I have been an officer in a school, church, or community group	89.5%	10.5%
I have been in choir or band in school, church, or community	81.8%	18.2%
I have been on a sports team at school, church, or community	89.5%	10.5%
I have been on a school sponsored trip over 100 miles from my home	81.0%	19.0%
I drive to school (or car pool) most of the time	77.2%	22.8%

Implications

The study revealed that Montana 4-H youth had strong future college aspirations; 95.4% planned to pursue some type of post secondary education. The findings provide 4-H youth educators a tool for creating more effective youth programs. This study also can be used as a tool for college and university faculty and staff to actively recruit 4-H youth.

There were no statistically significant correlations to show factors influencing or predicting future aspirations of youth. There were weak and moderate correlations found that may indicate predictors. These should be investigated further to ensure state and county 4-H professionals are meeting the need of their clients.

Research should be done to directly compare 4-H youth with non-4-H youth. It would also be beneficial to repeat this survey longitudinally to monitor aspiration changes with program or population changes.

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