

The Value of Being a Missouri 4-H Camp Counselor



Missouri 4-H
4-H Center for Youth Development

A study of the
experiences and
personal growth of
Missouri 4-H Camp
Counselors

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Executive Summary

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“Everybody paddles through pleasures in their lives: marriage, success, and children. And everybody paddles through storms as well, facing economic difficulties, fighting off adversaries, stumbling through unpleasant relationships, struggling with disease, moving on from a death in the family. How one deals with such disruptions in life... how one perseveres is a mark of who that person is....Summer camp is where the tools to fend off the hard times are acquired. They are tools that have worked for generations of campers, and they will work forever.”
(Eisner, 2005)

Introduction

Extension faculty, staff and volunteers have felt in their hearts for generations that 4-H Camp has an important, positive impact on the development of young people. Parents report how their children have grown noticeably as a result of a mere three or four-day stay at camp. 4-H leaders report that their club members return from camp exhibiting traits of being caring, capable, competent, and of good character; young people who contribute positively to the world around them. The growth that the campers experience shows that 4-H Camps in Missouri create environments where positive youth development occurs.

Currently, research on the value of camping is on the increase nationally, and 4-H Camps are clearly being documented as developing important life skills in youth. 4-H campers in Missouri were recently studied and the results were overwhelming; campers and parents both report that the 4-H Camping experience is highly effective in developing life skills (University of Missouri 4-H Center for Youth Development, 2007, p. 7).

*"The world is not
camp—and that's
too bad."*

(Eisner, 2005)

Nationally, 4-H Camping programs often utilize the leadership and energy of teenage camp counselors (ages 14-18) to plan and conduct local and area 4-H Camping programs. Since the value to campers has been well documented recently, one must ask the next logical question: ***What value does serving as a 4-H Camp Counselor hold for teens?*** Until recently, attempts to measure or document the value of the 4-H Camp experience for teen counselors have been rare. Missouri has become one of the leaders in the nation in evaluating the value of serving as a camp counselor.

The Study

With parental consent secured, 194 4-H Camp Counselors in the summer of 2007 gave their assent and completed an extensive questionnaire, evaluating their own growth and experiences as a camp counselor. The questionnaire gathered both qualitative and quantitative data.

The core of the questionnaire was the 70 questions of the Youth Experiences Survey (YES) 2.0, developed by Hansen, D.M. & Larson, R. (2005); University of Illinois, and measured counselors' experiences in the following domains:

- Identity Experiences
- Initiative Experiences
- Basic Skills (such as dealing with temper, stress and improving academic skills)
- Interpersonal Relationships
- Team Work and Social Skills
- Adult Networks and Social Capital
- Negative Experiences

The portion of the questionnaire developed by the Missouri design team gathered additional information such as demographics and involvement in other youth organizations. It also asked counselors to respond in terms of:

- The training and orientation they participated in as they prepared for their roles as camp counselors
- The expectations of them as counselors versus their ability to carry them out
- How the counselors gauged the level of their own importance in conducting 4-H Camp
- The perceived value of their counseling experience to them personally.

The study instrument and process were reviewed and approved by the MU campus Institutional Review Board. Counselors completed the questionnaire either at or near the end of their respective 2007 camp sessions. The instruments were gathered by MU Extension faculty/staff, who then forwarded them to the MU 4-H Center for Youth Development for data analysis.

Results

The results shown in Table 1 below are a summary of responses to the 70 questions from the YES portion of the survey grouped by domain. A Group Mean close to 4.0 indicates the counselors responded that “yes definitely”, they had positive experiences and had increased their skills and abilities in that domain. The low Group Mean in the "Negative Experiences" category indicates that negative experiences occurred virtually "Not At All".

Table 1

YES 2.0 Domains	Group Mean	
Identity Experiences	3.06	4 = “Yes, Definitely” 3 = “Quite a Bit” 2 = “A Little” 1 = “Not At All”
Initiative Experiences	3.30	
Basic Skills	2.71	
Interpersonal Relationships	3.27	
Team Work and Social Skills	3.48	
Adult Networks and Social Capital	2.90	
Negative Experiences	1.27	

The response rate above shows the strong positive impact of the camp counseling experience for teens in all domains. Very few negative experiences were reported by the Missouri 4-H Camp Counselors.

MU graduate research assistants and faculty were invited to conduct analyses to reveal possible relationships in the data.

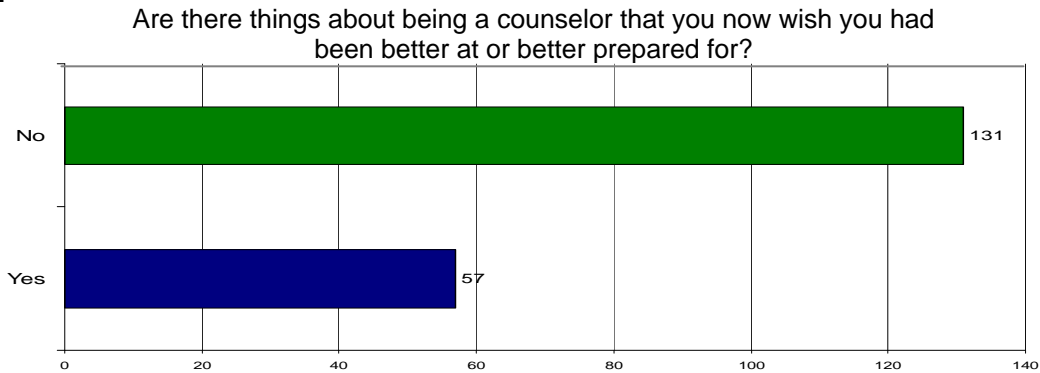
Beyond the YES portion of the survey, camp counselors described accomplishments in the areas of leadership, public speaking, role modeling, teaching, helping campers have a positive experience, and making a connection with their campers.

They also reported learning which of their own strategies didn't work for them as a camp counselor. They frequently mentioned learning that yelling and similar attempts at quieting campers and managing unruly behavior simply didn't work. By their own assessment, they wish they had been better prepared to lead activities and workshops, manage behavior (especially at lights-out), and be more familiar with

“I tried to mostly leave my cabin to themselves and not baby them. This resulted in mass chaos. Never doing that again!”

the characteristics of the various developmental stages of children. They would like to increase their own personal skills in the areas of leadership, communication, and patience.

Chart 1

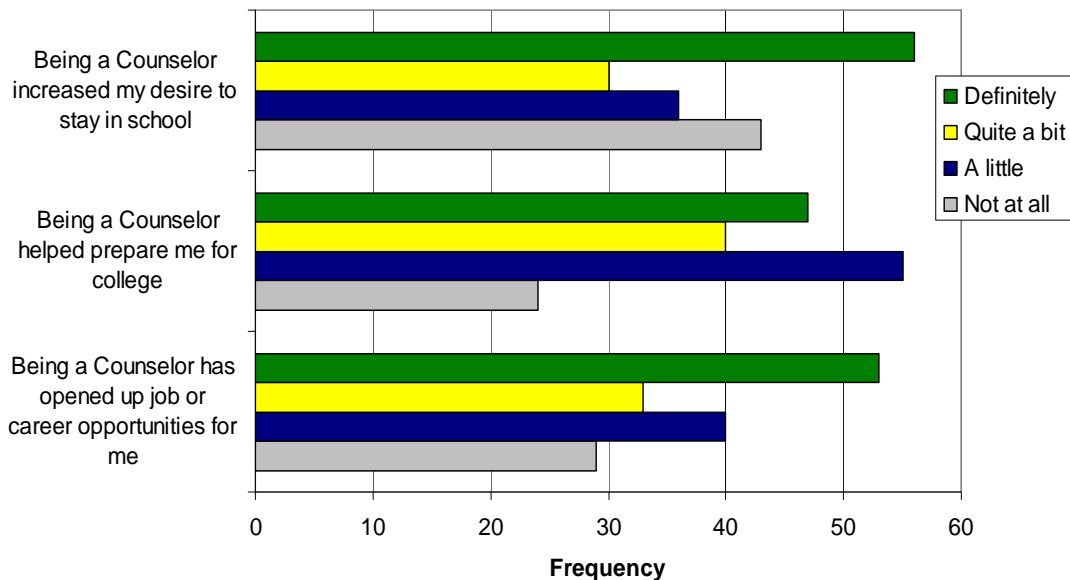


With an eye toward their own future, many reported that serving as a 4-H Camp Counselor had confirmed or changed their career plans. Most responses centered upon working with children and/or people in general. Many others credited their experience as 4-H Camp Counselor with increasing their abilities in areas such as leadership, self-confidence and speaking before groups – skills that they believe will enable them to "follow their dreams".

Of the 194 counselors in the study, 142 (73%) indicated that being a counselor helped them prepare for college. One hundred twenty-three (63%) reported that serving as a counselor increased their desire to stay in school, and 126 (65%) felt that serving as a counselor had opened up job or career opportunities for them. (see Chart 2)

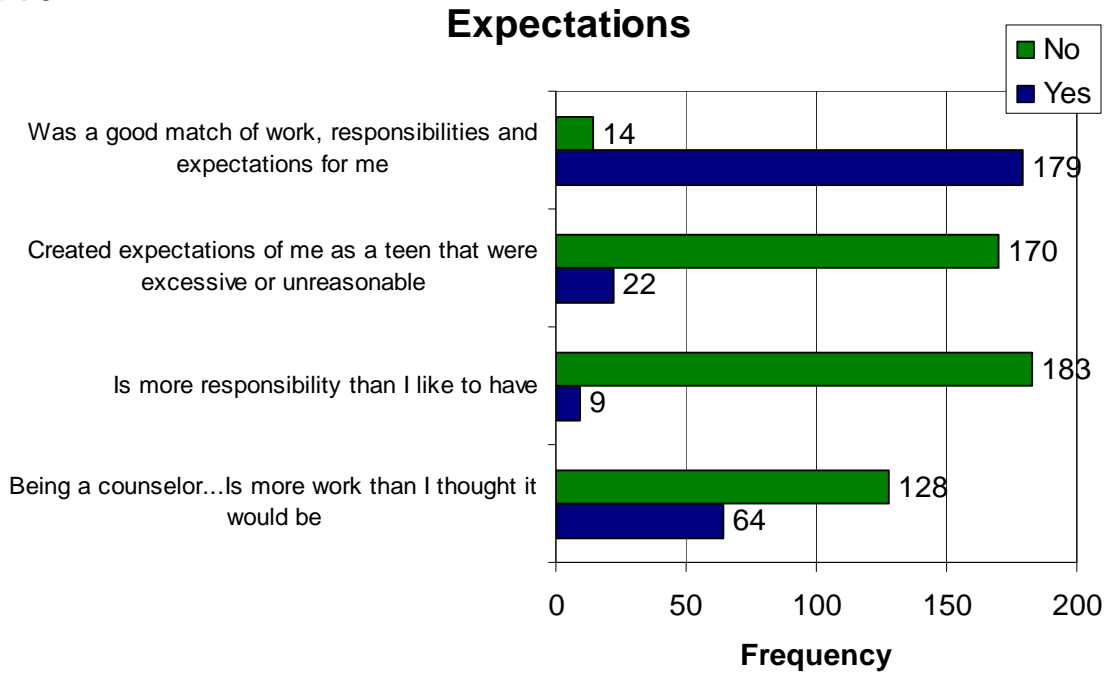
Chart 2

Impact of Serving as Camp Counselor on Career Goals



A variety of questions were asked to assess the level of the teens' expectations as it related to their level of ability or comfort level. A summary of those responses appear in Chart 3.

Chart 3



Counselors were asked how prepared they felt when the campers arrived, and additionally asked how prepared they actually turned out to be as the camp program progressed. Those responses are summarized in Chart 4. Counselors reported after camp that they were actually more prepared for their role than they felt just prior to the campers' arrival at camp.

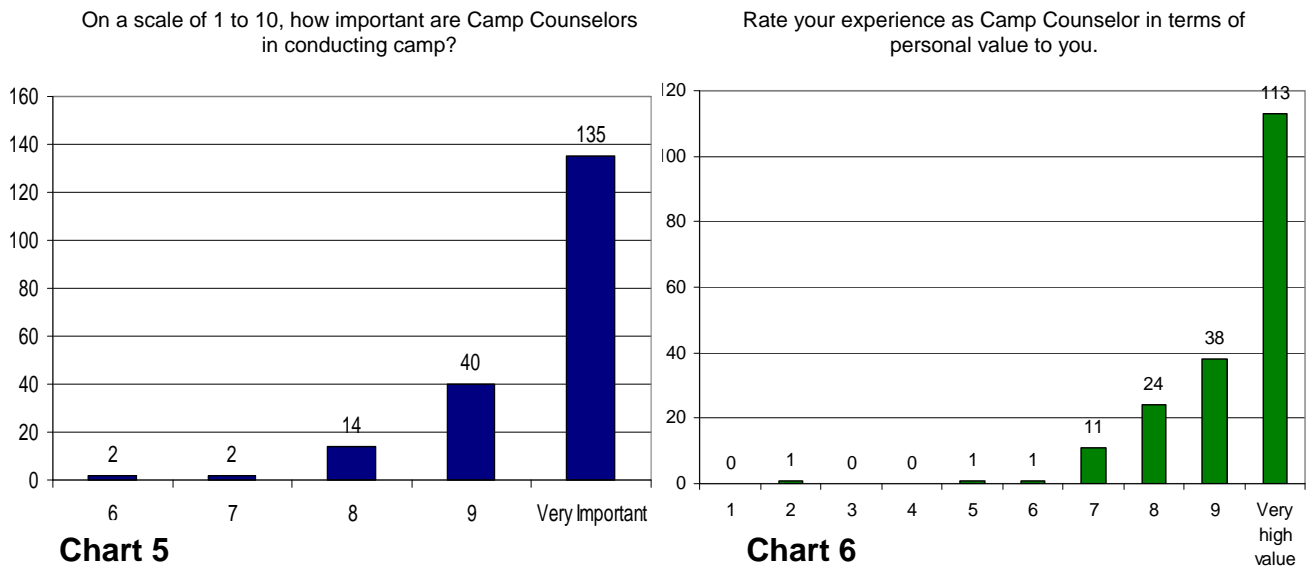
Chart 4



Extension staff and adult volunteers know the pivotal role that counselors play in conducting a viable, successful camp. To what degree do the counselors themselves recognize their own importance in conducting camp? It seems that they do. Those results are summarized in

Chart 5. Counselors who found personal value in their role as a counselor also reported more positive experiences in the Initiative Experiences domain of the YES questions. Counselors who reported feeling little or no social exclusion also reported more positive experiences **in all seven of the YES domains.**

Respondents were asked to rate their overall experience as a 4-H Camp Counselor in terms of its personal value to them on a 10 point scale (10=“Very High Value”). The mean of the response to that question was 9.28. Very high value indeed! (See Chart 6)



Conclusion

Missouri 4-H faculty, staff and volunteers can be justifiably proud of the remarkably positive growth these young people experience as they serve as role models and leaders for the campers (the next generation of 4-H Camp Counselors among them) and as positive role models for each other.

The 4-H Camping programs vary widely throughout the state in regard to how the counselors are selected and trained, the camp facilities, the administrative structure and the specific educational content. Yet in spite of that, each year several hundred 4-H members grow and positively develop in surprisingly similar ways. The camps differ widely. It is clear, though, that the 4-H faculty and staff throughout Missouri successfully apply consistent, research-based philosophy and practice to equip and empower their teen camp counselors. These capable camp counselors, in turn, create a healthy and progressive context in which campers grow toward their true potential.

This study proves that Missouri 4-H Camp Counselors themselves clearly mature in substantially positive ways as they lead, guide, mentor and plan for others.

“Camp is a laboratory . . . , and the science practiced in this lab will never be outdated. It’s God and humans teaming up to provide nature’s ultimate playground where [camp] becomes an exercise in training for life’s real-world, man-made challenges; where young people can develop their physical and natural skills while also maturing and growing socially.”

(Eisner, 2005)

A complete report of the study including copies of the instruments and additional documentation are available upon request from:

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