

The Value of Being a Camp Counselor

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

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ABSTRACT

In Missouri, as well as 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. One hundred ninety-three (193) 4-H Camp Counselors representing 17 different Missouri 4-H camping programs self-reported on their experiences as a 4-H Camp Counselor. Participants completed an extensive quantitative and qualitative survey at the conclusion of their service at camp during the summer of 2007. The results were consistent and positive. 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 those differences, each year several hundred Missouri 4-H teens grow and positively develop in surprisingly similar ways. This study proves that Missouri 4-H Camp Counselors clearly mature in substantially positive ways as they lead, guide, mentor, and plan for others.

INTRODUCTION

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 in Missouri and elsewhere, one must ask the next logical question: *What value does serving as a 4-H Camp Counselor hold for teens?*

METHODS

The study instrument was developed by a team of Missouri Extension faculty. The instrument included the Youth Experiences Survey (YES) 2.0 (2005), developed by Larson, Jarrett and Hansen; University of Illinois. Additional questions, developed by the Missouri research team, were added to the instrument to gather information such as prior experiences, involvement, training, expectations vs. abilities, counselors' importance in conducting camp, and the perceived value of camp counseling to them personally.

193 4-H Camp Counselors representing 17 different Missouri 4-H Camping Programs completed an extensive questionnaire at the conclusion of their service at camp. The instrument gathered both qualitative and quantitative data.

RESULTS

The response rate below 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.

YES 2.0 Domains	Domain 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	

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 counselor. They frequently mentioned learning that yelling and similar attempts at quieting campers and managing unruly behavior simply didn't work.

Some of the results were surprising: 63% reported an increased desire to stay in school; 65% reported job or career opportunities opened up for them; and 74% reported they were more prepared for college; all as a result of a short 3-5 day experience! This relevance to their current educational commitment was one unanticipated outcome.

Regardless of the differences between the various camp themes, structures and programmatic priorities, the results were strongly positive and consistent throughout the state.



HOW THIS RESEARCH CAN HELP ME

- Use this proven study instrument with any group of counselors. The instrument and process were reviewed and approved as meeting high ethical standards by the MU Institutional Review Board.
- Use your outcome data to recruit camp counselors.
- Raise public awareness to the value of the camp counselor role in any setting.
- Create opportunities for counselors to reflect deeply on their experiences, helping them identify and internalize the skills and abilities gained.
- Identify areas of strength and weakness in your training program and camp culture.
- Enhance and deepen your orientation, training, and post-camp contact with counselors and their parents.

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