

We All Want to be Heard

Listening and Responding to Volunteers through Appreciative Inquiry

Volunteers play an essential role in delivering educational programs conducted by Extension, particularly programs such as 4-H Youth Development and Master Gardeners. The 4-H Youth Development program has a long history of successfully utilizing adult volunteers to deliver programs that meet the needs of millions of youth.

Volunteers (1) multiply the efforts of paid educators and staff; (2) bring diversity and creativity to an organization; and (3) meet the needs of youth in communities (Fields, 2011). Radhakrishna and Ewing (2011) report that volunteers “perform a variety of roles, functions, and tasks to coordinate the 4-H program at the county level and come from all walks of life, bringing varied and rich experience to the 4-H program” (para. 1).

As Extension educators, it is important that we value volunteers and provide venues for them to offer their feedback and assessments of the programs. It is equally important that educators keep volunteers informed of any progress made in direct response to their feedback and assessments.

It is also essential that educators value the expertise, local connections and diversity of ideas that volunteers bring to the table. Just as youth-driven programs increase youth participation and program sustainability, programs delivered by

volunteers are more likely to be successful and sustainable when they are directly engaged in program direction and assessment (Arnold, Dolenc and Rennekamp, 2009; Fields, 2011).

The Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach provides a setting for volunteers to give feedback on the positive aspects of a program. AI enables program administrators and volunteers to build on what works well and strengthen areas that need improvement.

AI sessions help program leaders understand: (1) inspiring work (what’s working well); (2) partnering for success (what can be done better or more often); and (3) envisioning the future (creating the best path). AI sessions can describe “what we’ve heard and what we’re doing in response” so that there is a direct link between volunteer assessment and educator response/action.

This publication describes how to conduct an effective AI session to provide volunteers with a forum for sharing feedback and ideas for improving Extension programs such as 4-H.

Training is Essential for Volunteers to Successfully Expand Extension’s Reach

One of the many roles of 4-H educators is to manage a cadre of volunteers. This role may include responsibilities such as: (1) recruitment and retention; (2) orientation and on-going training; (3) support and conflict resolution; and (4) recognition and motivation of volunteers. While Extension educators are responsible for the direction of the overall 4-H program, it is often the volunteers, not Extension staff, who work directly with 4-H youth.

Arnold, Dolenc and Rennekamp (2009) state that “given the important role volunteers play in the ultimate success of building [positive youth development programs], it is increasingly imperative that volunteers receive effective training in how to plan and deliver 4-H programs with youth” (para. 4). Such training should go beyond the nuts and bolts of running a club by also including positive youth development (PYD) topics such as essential elements of PYD, experiential learning and behavior management.

For volunteer training resources, please refer to the [University of Maryland Extension \(UME\) Volunteer Policy](#) (Dennis, Gordon, Pahlman, Tabler, & Rhodes, 2010), [Tools of the Trade: Giving Kids a Lifetime Guarantee](#) (Reilly, Junge, Manglallan, & Killian, 2008), and the [Maryland 4-H Program Series: 4-H Club Program Management Kit](#) (Fields, Anderson, Corridon, et. al., 2014).

Assessing Your 4-H Programs

Program and volunteer assessments are key elements of enhancing program quality and retaining volunteers. Arnold, Dolenc and Rennekamp (2009) indicate that enhancing volunteer experiences and satisfaction is critical to successful recruitment and retention. In order to retain quality volunteers, they need to feel satisfied in their roles of providing exceptional programs that

makes a real difference in the lives of young people (Arnold, Dolenc and Rennekamp, 2009).

What is Appreciative Inquiry?

One way to engage volunteers in the assessment and direction of a program is through an appreciative inquiry approach. University of Maryland’s (UMD) Center for Leadership and Organizational Change (CLOC) describes appreciative inquiry (AI) as:

“A collaborative, strengths-based approach to organizational development which emphasizes shared leadership and full engagement by everyone in an organization. It is a generative way to energize the creative best in people and their organizations.” (Center for Leadership and Organizational Change, 2010).

This approach is very appropriate for 4-H because positive youth development is also a strengths-based approach with preparation and development as its goals rather than prevention and problem solving.

Thousands of organizations around the world have effectively used AI to facilitate positive change (CLOC, 2010). University of Maryland Extension has used AI during the strategic planning process and within Maryland 4-H youth development during a Baltimore County Volunteer development training.

Using Appreciative Inquiry in Program Assessment

Program assessments are “critical for documenting program impact, making changes for future programs, and identifying additional goals and objectives for future programming” (Severs, Graham, Gamon, & Conklin, 1997). Ongoing program assessments ensure that educators are delivering quality programs that meet the needs

and interests of youth participants and adult volunteers.

Volunteer feedback is a critical component of assessing volunteer-led programs such as 4-H Youth Development. It is essential that volunteers are engaged in the program development process especially as our 4-H programs continue to evolve to meet the needs of our increasingly diverse audiences. Culp and Schawrtz (1999) share that "...involving volunteers in all phases of 4-H program development, philosophical and organizational change should improve retention, as volunteers will support and understand the need for organizational and philosophical changes in the 4-H program." (para. 17)

One way to engage volunteers in program assessment is to integrate AI sessions into volunteer development and training opportunities. You can facilitate an AI session during volunteer development training by dividing the session into three segments: 1) paired groupings for individual program reflection; 2) combined pairings for group reflection; and 3) energizing for the future.

Paired Groupings for Individual Program Reflection

Within this segment, volunteers divide into pairs for reflective interviews. Both volunteers would have about 10 minutes each to serve as interviewer and interviewee. Potential topics and questions for this reflective survey include:

Inspired Service – Recalling a Best Experience

Each participant should ask the other member of his/her pair to think about their interactions and engagements with 4-H. The interviewer should ask their partner to tell a story about his/her best experience with 4-H. Suggested questions are:

- What were you doing?

- Who were you volunteering with?
- What made it successful?
- What was the impact on you and/or your community?

Partnering for Success

Each partner in a pair should ask the other person:

- On a scale of 1 to 5 with "1" being "not at all" and "5" being "exceptional," how successful would you say the program is at fulfilling its purpose?"
- What do you need from the program to help you fulfill the organization's purpose?
- How can the program help you achieve our goals?

Envisioning the Future

Each pair should imagine 10 years have passed and the program is exceeding expectations. Each member of the pair should ask the other person:

- How have things changed?
- What new opportunities exist?
- What challenges are you experiencing?

After each of the volunteers have been interviewed, the pairs will find one or two other pairs to form a larger group. This will lead into the next segment.

Combined Pairings for Group Reflection

During this segment, the group should receive three sheets of newsprint that are individually labeled: **inspired service** (what's working; positive impact), **partnering for success** (do more of or better), and **envisioning the future** (creating the best path).

Each group member should take no more than a minute to introduce their partner by sharing his/her best experience in the program. Group members

should then identify a recorder and a reporter and take 15 minutes to generate a list of items for the categories written on each of the three newsprint pages by using the data generated from the interview sheets.

Once the group has completed this process, they will transition to the final segment.

Energizing for the Future

During this segment, volunteers will review the items on their group's newsprint lists and decide what statements make them feel the most energized. Give each volunteer nine sticky dots to place next to the statements they feel most strongly about (energy). Ask the volunteers to place three dots next to statements on each newsprint list. Volunteers may place more than one dot on a statement if it is particularly important to them.

Once all the group member's dots are placed on the three newsprint lists, tabulate the dots to identify the top three statements on each list.

Each group should share the top three statements on their newsprint lists with the larger audience.

A final report generated from the AI session can be shared with the volunteer constituent base and used to enhance the program quality in the future.

Center for Leadership and Organizational Change. (2010) *Appreciative Inquiry Facilitator Training/Certification*®. Retrieved from <http://www.cloc.umd.edu/Appreciative%20Inquiry%20Facilitator%20Training%20flyer.docx>

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References

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