

## **Establishment of the Teen Excellence in Leadership Institute (TELI)**

### **Abstract**

A planning team was coordinated to envision, plan, and implement a new teen leadership program for [State]; the Teen Excellence in Leadership Institute (TELI) was the result. Outstanding teens, nominated by 4-H agents or FFA advisors/agriculture teachers, were selected through a competitive process. The institute design encompasses in-person events and interactive virtual meetings. Institute goals are to: 1) understand self and develop a personalized action plan for engaged leadership, 2) network with teens interested in learning about issues facing youth and communities, 3) design a team project to address community leadership needs, 4) learn about advocacy and outreach. Topics include: Strengths-Based Leadership, problem solving style, group facilitation skills, youth-adult partnerships, team building, project collaboration, peer feedback and evaluation, leadership principles, and critical reflection.

### **Introduction**

Adolescents are barred by constraints and threats that serve as obstacles for sustaining personal and self-regulatory growth (Larson, 2006). Recently, positive youth development efforts and the demand for soft skill development of new professionals entering the workforce has called for a reform in the way we think about youth leadership development programs (Lerner, 2005; Crawford, Lang, Fink, & Dalton, 2011). Positive youth development requires the growth of the Five Cs: competence, confidence, character, connection, and caring (Lerner, 2005). In addition, leadership, communication, problem solving, and decision making skill development is crucial to foster career readiness (Rutherford, Stedman, Felton, Wingenbach, & Harlen, 2004). Worker (2014) acknowledged leadership development of youth as a proven strategy to create experiences that foster essential elements of youth development, including: a sense of belonging, mastery, generosity, and independence. With this in mind, youth leadership programs that incorporate soft skill advancement can lead to positive youth development.

Various youth organizational programs, such as 4-H and FFA, have addressed these issues, but are generally context specific and geared towards youth with similar interest and access to specific programs (Radhakrishna & Sinasky, 2005). Further, program leadership in [State] identified the need to better integrate motivated youth from both 4-H and FFA organizations under the pretense of collective capacity building. Therefore, we have created a leadership development opportunity for teens with this challenge and purpose as the foundation. By engaging and developing outstanding teens, we are actively working to identify and address global issues that face communities today. TELI combines two face-to-face weekend retreats with virtual sessions for team project development and updates. Supplemental content on peer feedback interactions and political process engagement are integrated in recorded and archived virtual learning. In addition, youth-adult partnerships are incorporated based on previous research that demonstrates the effectiveness of these partnerships in positive leadership growth for teens (Anderson & Sandmann, 2009). Overall, the experiences fuse a well-rounded lineup of topics that lead youth towards a more holistic consideration of their personal leadership skills and philosophies.

## **Background**

The TELI program seeks to accomplish the following goals: 1) to understand self and develop a personalized action plan for engaged leadership, 2) to network with other teens interested in learning about the issues facing youth and communities, 3) to design a team project to address community leadership needs in [State], 4) to learn more about advocacy and outreach that will improve the lives of others. Several frameworks and models reflect the overarching goals of the program and aided in the creation of the TELI Model. Ricketts and Rudd (2002) conducted a meta-analysis of youth leadership development and established a conceptual model that included five dimensions: leadership knowledge and information; leadership attitude, will, and desire; decision making, reasoning, and critical thinking; oral and written communication skills; and intra and interpersonal relations. With this model in mind, Chickering's (1993) Theory of Identity Development, which is commonly utilized within FFA, provided guidance for the development of the seven vectors: developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity. In addition, this program utilizes the 4-H Citizenship Framework by incorporating the key focus areas of civic engagement, service, civic education, and personal development (4-H National Headquarters, 2011). The incorporation of these models and frameworks provided a solid foundation for youth leadership development.

## **Description of Program/Methodology**

In the fall of 2013, conversations began about the need to have an integrated and dynamic statewide youth program that would be roughly modeled after the adult agricultural leadership development program in the state. Recognizing two youth development organizations that address leadership (4-H and FFA), an articulated attempt was made to develop novel programming to provide high-caliber experiences that were different than the opportunities available to youth in their respective organizations. A program planning committee was formed for deliberate discussions about program objectives and theoretical influence.

In order to establish a high benchmark for program participation early on, a decision was made to require program applications to be accompanied by a written nomination from either a 4-H agent or FFA advisor. Both of these positions lend themselves to being mentors and role models for young leaders. Selected participants each receive a partial scholarship to attend two face-to-face weekend events (fall and spring) and interact via two virtual sessions (winter). Attendees benefit from a full curriculum that includes personal assessments, skill development, guest speakers, and team- and project-based learning. Topics include: Strengths-Based Leadership, problem solving style, group facilitation skills, youth-adult partnerships, team building, project collaboration, peer feedback and evaluation, leadership principles, and critical reflection. Such topics and skills are typically offered through adult programming. Previous research and planning team members believe that exposing teens early is an advantage for developing young leaders.

To further explore the impact that participation in TELI has on our youth, several aspects of program evaluation and learning assessment are implemented. Each participant completes a personalized action plan at the first session to be revisited and implemented on program

completion. Pre and post surveys based on the 4-H Citizenship common measures were used to measure any gained knowledge and confidence. Members of each program team participate actively toward the identification of a problem to address, plan for implementation, and preparation for presentation. Opportunities for constructive peer feedback are provided throughout.

Project teams present their work to an invited panel of stakeholders. This provides an opportunity to further develop presentation skills. Participants are encouraged to incorporate insights gained as they reflect on the entire experience and how personal and group dynamics, strengths, and diversity of thought factored into the success of their experience. Feedback from the first cohort of TELI participants was taken into consideration by planners as the program outline and content were further developed and refined before planning the second cycle.

### Current Results

The 2014-2015 TELI cohort included 23 youth accepted for full participation. The institute convened for a weekend in November 2014, a virtual meeting in January of 2015 and the closing weekend in March 2015. The opening weekend focused on content delivery and identifying team project topics, while the virtual meeting was used primarily as a check-in for group project work. The final weekend centered on the team project presentations to an invited panel of experts and reflection and a recap of the institute. Project team topics focused on addressing issues such as low rates of youth involved in community organizations, education (including career and technical education), bullying, lack of community pride, and a need for increased club/chapter involvement.

At the conclusion of the inaugural program, participants were surveyed and asked to indicate their agreement with 16 4-H Citizenship common measures using a four-point Likert scale. Participants reflected on their views before TELI and after TELI. 4-H Citizenship common measures were chosen in order to begin uniform data collection suitable for ongoing studies and sharing with youth practitioners. Paired t-tests were used to examine whether statistical differences existed between pre- and post-survey results. Respondents indicated a statistically significant change in 15 of the 16 common measures evaluated.

**Table 1.** 4-H Common Measures Results, Year One (N=15)

Measure	<i>Before TELI</i>	<i>After TELI</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
I set goals for myself.	2.87	3.60	*
I have a plan for reaching my goals.	2.80	3.73	*
I have the confidence to speak in front of groups.	3.13	3.60	*
I am willing to consider the ideas of other even if they are different than mine.	3.07	3.67	*
I know community leaders who support me.	3.00	3.53	
I have talents I can offer others.	2.47	3.53	*
I like to work with others to solve problems.	2.60	3.33	*
I am able to lead a project that will make a difference in my community.	2.40	3.73	*

**Table 1.** (Continued)

Measure	<i>Before TELI</i>	<i>After TELI</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
I pay attention to new events that affect my community.	2.40	3.40	*
When I hear about an issue, I try to figure out if they are just telling one side of the story.	2.67	3.33	*
I can contact someone that I have never met before to get their help with a problem.	2.53	3.20	*
I plan to work on projects to better my community.	2.47	3.47	*
After high school, I will continue to work to better my community.	2.93	3.54	*
I help make sure everyone gets an opportunity to say what they think.	3.33	3.80	*
I treat everyone fairly and equally when I am in charge of a group.	3.40	3.80	*
I am able to lead a group in making a decision.	2.80	3.67	*

\* Significant at  $p < .05$  based on a paired samples t-test for differences between responses for before and after TELI.

### Conclusions/Recommendations

After a successful inaugural program, TELI was replicated and is currently in a second year of programming reaching more than 40 youth participants in total. 4-H Citizenship common measures survey data yield that TELI is an effective programming process to increase teens' ability to plan, set goals, solve problems, and to lead community projects. Although these measures were developed for use in 4-H programming, the implications of them on engaged citizenship and youth development are not limited to 4-H alone. As TELI includes participants from both 4-H and FFA, we conclude that reported improvements in these measures positively impacts all youth in the TELI program and, therefore, holds implications for all youth practitioners.

In year one, a survey was administered at the conclusion of the program and participants were asked to indicate their agreement with the common measures, self-reflecting on perspectives for before TELI and after TELI in the same survey (N=15, March 2015). In order to improve the strength of the measures for participants in the second cycle year, a pre- survey was administered before the beginning of the first weekend (N=16, November 2015), and a post- survey will be administered at the conclusion of the final weekend (N=16, April 2016).

Future recommendations include developing a program manual for implementing teen leadership training using the TELI model, so that replication in other states can be successfully facilitated. We also plan to implement a sustainability/transition plan for ongoing leadership of the current program, holding true to program planning methods incorporating continuous evaluation for improvement. Additionally, given acquisition of adequate resources regionally, teams could be empowered to implement their issues-based team projects in their communities. At present, the project solutions are presented by the teams but not enacted, due to the geographically disperse nature of each project team and limitations imposed by resources and liability.

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