

# Organizing Head, Heart, Hands and Health for Larger Service:

## The Public Value of 4-H Youth Development Work

*Scott Peters*

**I**magine the following scene. At a public hearing, a group of county commissioners and other citizens are mulling over the proposed budget for their county for the following year. In recent years, the economy has been good, so the budget process has been relatively smooth. But the future seems increasingly uncertain, and fears that tighter times might be coming have made several commissioners nervous about the sustainability of the county's current budget. Additionally, new concerns are being raised about the appropriateness of using tax money to fund certain kinds of work. Maybe some things

shouldn't be funded by taxpayers, some commissioners are saying. Maybe some things should be funded through the private marketplace, or through voluntary contributions. Other commissioners express skepticism about the value of some publicly funded work, questioning whether it's resulting in any tangible outcomes that benefit the public.

In the course of the hearing, one first-term commissioner, a relative newcomer to the county, points to the item on the budget that calls for funds for Cooperative Extension and 4-H work. She looks perplexed. "Why are we using taxpayers' money to fund 4-H work?" she asks. Turning



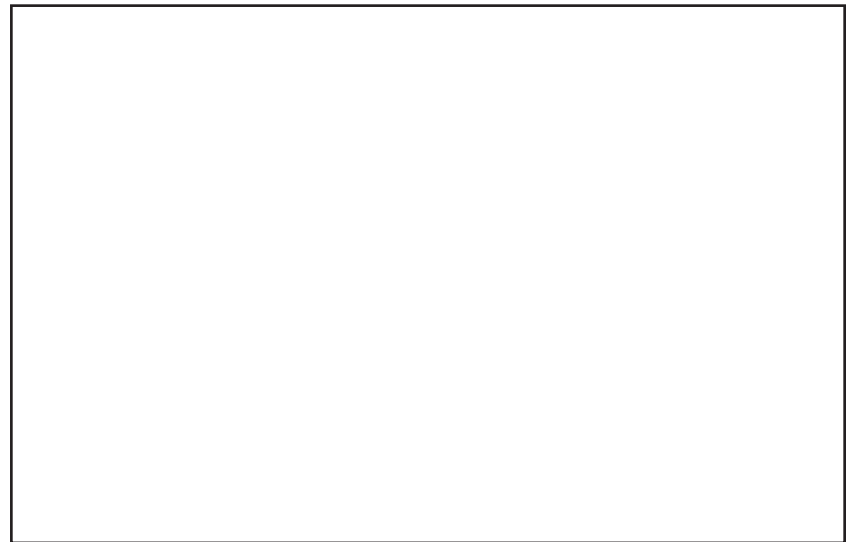
Early 4-H clubs separated youth by gender with "corn clubs" for boys and "tomato clubs" for girls.

to members of the county Extension committee, she asks questions that no one can remember have ever been asked so directly before: “What is the public value of 4-H? What does it contribute to the life and well-being of our county?”

Here is a crucial challenge that cuts to the heart of our mission in 4-H youth development work. What is—or what could be—the public value of 4-H in today’s world? In a time marked by a growing concern over the health of our public life, a growing scrutiny of publicly funded work, and a growing struggle with questions of diversity and inclusion, how will we choose to answer this question? What exactly is or could be 4-H’s contribution to the building of a vibrant and just public life?

There is, of course, no single correct or best answer to the question of 4-H’s public value and work. A range of answers can and have been given to this question, reflecting a diversity of perspectives, values, and experiences. Yet while we must continue to search for answers for ourselves as we attempt to meet today’s challenges and opportunities, we should not neglect the insights, lessons, and inspiration found in 4-H history. For at the center of the 4-H idea as it was developed nearly 100 years ago was a deep public mission and promise, one which simultaneously sought both the individual development of youth and the tangible improvement or enrichment of a larger public world beyond the self. The essence of this mission is reflected today in the recently published

Keys to Quality Youth Development (Center for 4-H Youth Development, 1995). The third of the eight keys this publication names and describes declares that “youth develop self-worth through meaningful contribution.” The central impor-



tance of public contribution in 4-H work is also captured in the 4-H pledge, adopted nationally in 1927 (and revised in 1973), in which youth pledge to use their head, heart, hands and health for “larger service . . . for my family, my club, my community, my country, and my world” (Reck, 1951; Wessel and Wessel, 1982).

4-H and the national Cooperative Extension System of which it is a part are institutions created and organized to help people address and realize core human needs, values, and ideals that transcend time and space. What 4-H in particular has stood for over time is a passionate belief that youth have creativity, talent, and energy that can be developed, tapped, and organized for serious, constructive public contribution. Entwined in this belief are two key convictions: That there is something in the human spirit that yearns for meaning which can only come through creative work with others on matters of public importance, and that in a society that calls itself “democratic” there is an obligation to help youth take their place in public life as full contributing members. To date, these convictions have been deemed worthy of support by public tax dollars. But will they continue to be? And just as importantly, is 4-H still effectively pursuing them?

**Youth in early 4-H clubs produced things of real value, both for their families and their communities.**

Keeping in mind our fictional county commissioner and her challenge to us to name and defend 4-H's public value, this paper explores the shape and spirit of 4-H's early public mission. A fresh look at this early mission, it is hoped, will lend insight and inspiration to its renewal in our time. As we look to the past, there are two key questions we should ask: How was the public mission of 4-H understood and practiced in its early years? How relevant, desirable, or useful is this mission for us today?

### 4-H's Early Public Mission

In 1931, Secretary of Agriculture Arthur M. Hyde appointed a special committee to study the trends, objectives, and results of 4-H club work. The committee's main goal, he wrote, was to help "the entire public see more clearly the value and place of this fine movement in the public interests." By 1931, 4-H had indeed become a movement. From its small, scattered beginnings at the turn of the century, it had grown into a national network of clubs enrolling over 800,000 boys and girls. And this number was growing at around 10 percent per year. Hyde's committee, composed of men and women representing land-grant colleges, local 4-H clubs, and the United States Department of Agriculture, issued their report in 1935. Titled "Recommended Policies Governing 4-H Club Work," the report concluded that the top objective of 4-H club work was to "help rural boys and girls to develop desirable ideals and standards for farming, homemaking, community life, and citizenship, and a sense of responsibility for their attainment." An equally important companion objective was to "train rural boys and girls in cooperative action to the end that they may increase their accomplishments and, through associated



efforts, better assist in solving rural problems."

The report's emphasis on 4-H's public or civic purpose mirrored the conclusions of earlier reports and studies. In 1926, for example, C. B. Smith noted in a widely distributed report that "4-H club work is a public enterprise, administered with public funds, supervised by public officials, and should be maintained wholly in the public interest" (Smith, 1926). For Smith, 4-H's deep public identity had direct implications for club work. The central purpose of 4-H, he declared, was to teach "rural boys and girls how to make of themselves public-spirited, useful citizens and leaders in rural affairs"

A study by George E. Farrell reviewing the first decade of 4-H club work under the Smith-Lever Act (1914–1924) described 4-H's "chief educational value" in deeply civic terms:

"In boys' and girls' 4-H club work the attention of farm boys and girls in groups is focused upon the community Extension program in an interesting, challenging way and their active participation enlisted to make their own community a better place in which to live. Real life situations are uncovered involving issues affecting their own interests—present and future—together with those of their community as a whole. When such issues seem vital, maximum interest is enkindled and a community consciousness, accompanied by a sense of community responsibility, is developed in a natural, wholesome way" (Farrell, 1926).

The three advantages of 4-H club work, Farrell wrote, were awakening in youth the desire to serve their community, bringing youth into a "new and interesting partnership with their parents and neighbors," and providing youth a "valuable experience in giving up some immediate interest for the larger one of trying to make the general home life of the community in which they live as fine as possible."

## Public Mission in Action: Stories from Minnesota

These stories show that the core spirit of 4-H's early public mission is still applicable and relevant in today's world. They show how Extension educators are helping youth in Minnesota "develop self-worth through meaningful contribution."

### Aitkin Coffee Shop

Thanks to the vision and hard work of a group of high school aged youth, residents of Aitkin, a small town in one of Minnesota's poorest counties, have a nonprofit business that combines a coffee shop with free access to the Internet. The idea for the business was hatched in December of 1997 when members of the Youth Community Work Group at Aitkin High School heard about youth creating their own business in another community. The story inspired the Aitkin youth group, which had been looking for a way to make a serious contribution to their community. With their town's struggling economy in mind, they decided that founding a new business would be an important way to contribute.

With the support, encouragement, and mentorship of Renee Hink Ferrington, one of Aitkin county's Extension educators, the youth group began meeting weekly to flesh out their idea and develop a business plan. After scanning the community and interviewing a number of youth and adults, they provided a place for community members to meet and socialize over coffee and baked goods along with public access to the Internet at times when it isn't cur-

rently available. Located in a building just off the main street (the former Aitkin Dairy), the business is staffed and managed by youth volunteers. Money earned over expenses is put into a scholarship fund and divided between the volunteers.

Youth have learned a range of business and civic skills from their work on the coffee shop project, and they've come to see new possibilities both in themselves and their hometown. In addition, they've also shown adults that youth are both capable of and interested in making serious contributions to their communities. As Renee points out, "Kids have wonderful ideas, if we would just listen and give them a chance to live them out."

### Brainerd Skateboard Park

When the Brainerd, Minnesota, city council passed an ordinance in October of 1997 banning the use of skateboards in their downtown (property was allegedly damaged by skateboarders), a group of youth decided to speak up and be heard. The group, comprised of about 20 teenagers involved in a service learning program as part of the Community Youth Diversion Program, presented a signed petition to the mayor, Bonnie Cumberland. The mayor agreed to form a committee to explore options for addressing the concerns raised in the petition. She asked the youth to take the responsibility of leading the work of the committee.

A diverse group of youth and adults formed a Skate Park Facility

committee. The group developed and circulated a survey in the schools to find out if young people were interested in establishing and using a skate park facility. Committee members formed subgroups focused on looking for potential locations, developing fundraising ideas, and researching design, safety, insurance, and liability issues. One subgroup used the Internet to get ideas from youth groups around the country that had successfully created skateboard parks.

While many adults in the community were initially skeptical about the project, especially given the serious liability and cost issues it entailed, the youth refused to give up. By April they had resolved all the major challenges that stood in the way of realizing their dream. With their proposal fully developed, they went back to the mayor and city council to ask for support. The mayor and council not only endorsed the proposal, but provided \$20,000 in matching funds to help pay for construction. Once the park is completed, youth will continue their leadership by organizing a safety patrol. Joe Corneya, an Extension educator who served on the committee, says the skateboard park project was successful because youth and adults in 4-H learn about committee process and leadership skills. Their accomplishments and perseverance demonstrate the significant potential of all youth in Brainerd to contribute to the improvement of community life.

Two questions might help us better understand the historical public mission of 4-H as it was reflected in these early studies. First, how was the concept of “citizenship” understood? Second, what were youth supposed to learn and contribute as they expressed their citizenship?

### How Was Citizenship Understood?

At the heart of the early public mission in both 4-H and Cooperative Extension work was a view of Extension as a force for awakening and organizing the creative, cooperative spirit of the American people in enhancing the dignity and vitality of rural life and culture. The early pioneers of this mission held a passionate conviction that the forging of a new partnership between science and practical knowledge, wisdom, and experience offered promise of enhancing the capacity of ordinary people to be the creators and producers of their own lives and communities. This conviction, which rested on a view of democracy as something to be lived and practiced in everyday environments, gave citizenship a richer, more inclusive meaning than simply that of legal status. It defined citizenship in terms of public contribution, either through work that created things of broad public value or through participation in local deliberation, problem solving, and policy making.

Organizing and developing a locally grounded, work-centered understanding of citizenship was viewed as the central task of county Extension staff. As an early leader in state and national Extension work wrote,

“In any discussion of the county agent as a rural leader and organizer, this fundamental premise should be recognized at the outset: Practically every community has within itself the inherent ability and leadership to discover and to bring about the solution of its own problems. Every county agent should approach problems of organization

and leadership from this standpoint. Unless he [*sic*] does, he is likely to fail in what should be his largest objective, namely, the development of strong, self-reliant men and women and of good rural citizenship in the open country. This is, of course, the first essential of democracy. If local units or community groups are not able to work out their own problems, then democracy fails at its roots. All permanent improvement lies within. It is only leaven that is sometimes necessary to supply from without.” (Burritt, 1922)

Youth were to have a full role in a community’s life as citizens. As Mary Mims, an Extension and 4-H leader from Louisiana, wrote in 1932, “We have been saying to our children, ‘You are the future citizens of the nation. You must be preparing yourselves, now, that you may be able to perform your civic duties when you are men and women.’ That idea is not comprehensive enough. Every boy, every girl, is a citizen now! Their political rights await them in the future, but unless they are worthy home and community citizens they will never realize the responsibilities that will come with the possessing of these rights. They have a definite part to play, now. . . .” (Mims, 1932)

### What Were Youth Supposed to Learn and Contribute?

In the early years of 4-H club work, youth were separated by gender into “corn clubs” for boys and “tomato clubs” for girls (Reck, 1951; Wessel & Wessel, 1982). Other clubs included canning clubs, clothing clubs, pig clubs, and poultry clubs. The seemingly narrow, private focus of such clubs makes it difficult, on the surface, to understand and appreciate their deep public value and purpose. For, just as Mary Mims insisted they could, 4-H youth in such clubs played a “definite part” as “worthy home and community citizens.” In partnership with adults,

4-H youth addressed real problems by producing things of real value, both for their families and their communities. But early 4-H work wasn't just devoted to doing, it was also devoted to learning. Through their experiences, youth learned about nature, science, work, and community life, while developing skills, capacities, dignity, poise, and self-worth that would enable them to continue to grow, learn, and contribute.

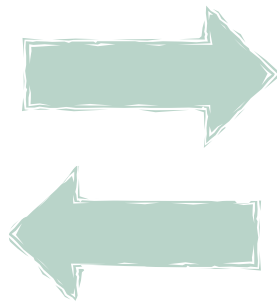
A look at what took place in the South helps bring the public or civic value of 4-H club work into focus. At the turn of the last century, rural people in the South struggled under an oppressive, poverty-laden system of farming. Whether as small landowners or as sharecroppers, Southern farmers found themselves stuck in an unsustainable system that was almost totally dependent on one crop. This system depleted their soils, left them highly susceptible to pests, and kept them perpetually in debt (Fite, 1984). It was in the face of these problems that Seaman Knapp, now considered the “father” of the Cooperative Extension system, developed what became known as the “farmers’ cooperative demonstration work.” This demonstration work helped spark a movement in the South, joined and led by Booker T. Washington and many others. At the core of the movement was a “demonstration method,” adopted in the early years as the central method of 4-H and other Extension work (Martin, 1941; Bailey, 1945; Scott, 1971; Mayberry, 1989; Neyland, 1990).

Knapp’s demonstration method was based on the educational principle of “learning by doing.” It put the experiential education theories of Johann Pestalozzi, Liberty Hyde Bailey, John Dewey, and others into practice by organizing rural people in efforts to create and apply new knowledge and methods that would benefit

every dimension of their lives and communities. Demonstrations were not make-believe “role-plays” without risk or tangible outcomes. Rather, they were visible, public initiatives developed and led by local people in partnership with land-grant universities and government. They combined work, education, and practical citizenship in projects that offered both private and public rewards.

O. B. Martin, one of the early pioneers of demonstration work, described a demonstration as “a progressive, practical example of better farming or home making by a farmer or a member of his [*sic*] family which leads to greater profit, comfort, culture, influence and power” (Martin, 1941). Martin’s vision of the aim of demonstration work, following Knapp, was not centered only on enhancing the private lives and status of individual families. Its deeply public aim was grounded in a passionate desire to build a vibrant, cooperative rural life and culture by combining science, local knowledge, wisdom, and experience.

The ill effects of the single-crop farming system in the South had economic, environmental, and civic or community dimensions. To address each of these, county agents—acting as a “leaven” or catalyst—helped youth and adults develop and organize a diversification program based on public demonstrations. Diversification meant adding new crops such as corn, adopting crop rotation methods, growing more and larger gardens to produce vegetables for home consumption and for market, adding livestock, and deepening communities’ cooperative spirit and capacities. As youth were often more eager than adults to try new methods and ideas, they played a leading role in the demonstration work.



Through public works like community gardens, youth contribute to the improvement of the community.



Without engaging the diverse perspectives, talents, and energies of all citizens—including youth—we will not meet the increasingly complex challenges of our time.

Through corn clubs, pig clubs, canning clubs, and other efforts, youth in the South learned to work together to make direct, tangible contributions to their families and communities. Their meaningful accomplishments—which had economic, civic, and cultural dimensions—helped to develop their sense of pride and self-worth. Because demonstrations were designed

The annual Youth Summit helps 4-Hers develop and practice civic leadership.



to be publicly visible to the entire community, they not only showed youth what they could accomplish and contribute, they also taught adults and the broader community what could be done to improve their lives. In other words, youth functioned as both teachers and learners, modeling a form of active citizenship that produced things of broad public value.

As national 4-H club work developed over the first few decades of this century, youth took on a variety of projects and initiatives that had both personal and public impact. Branching out from their original focus on farm and home life, 4-H youth took leadership in contributing to the betterment of all dimensions of neighborhood and community life. From improving public health and safety to community “beautification” and conservation projects; and from the building of community centers to the founding of music and arts groups, youth engaged in public work that combined their personal and family interests with those of the broader community (Hanna, 1936; Reck, 1951). Through a practical citizenship grounded in public work, youth brought 4-H’s and Cooperative Extension’s public mission to life.

## How Relevant is 4-H's Early Public Mission Today?

Let's return to our county commissioner's question from the beginning of this paper and see if this brief review of 4-H history can help us respond. In historical terms, what can we say was the public value of 4-H youth development work? One answer is that 4-H held deep public value because it organized youth in projects and initiatives which developed their civic and work-related skills and capacities while also resulting in meaningful contributions to their communities.

In other words, 4-H was created both for the educational development of youth and as a means for tapping and engaging their talent, creativity, energy, spirit, and enthusiasm (their "head, heart, hands, and health") for constructive public contribution. At its best, 4-H helps bring youth into their roles as serious participants in public life, where, in partnership with adults, they can develop their self-worth through meaningful contribution. In doing so, 4-H embodies a core principle put forward in 1936 by educator Paul Hanna: "To do something which others count significant ranks very high among the satisfying and steadying influences in life. For the young to feel that their activities have community significance is to accord them a worth and a standing that will call out the best the young have to give." This captures the essence of the public spirit and mission of early 4-H work.

Is this early understanding of the public value of 4-H youth development work still relevant in today's world? As long as we are willing to place a high value on our common life, and view youth as full contributors to it, I believe it is. Across the nation, youth, adult volunteers, and 4-H staff are demonstrating the continuing relevance of 4-H's early public mission in new and creative ways (see "Public Mission in Action: Stories from Minnesota").

Our task today, however, is not to try to duplicate 4-H's early mission and work, but rather to capture its best spirit and adapt it to our times and aspirations. We must also acknowledge and learn from our past and present mistakes and failures. As lofty and democratic as 4-H's early public mission seems, it has fallen far short of full realization. It has all too often been damaged and limited by exclusionary practices and attitudes. In addition, it has been marginalized by the growth of an overly professionalized, individualized, therapeutic, and consumer-oriented culture that limits and constrains the public spirit and contributions of both youth and adults.

While the question of the public value of 4-H youth development work has received only marginal attention in recent decades, it is now emerging as a central concern for those engaged in 4-H youth development work. In a recent survey by the 4-H Cooperative Curriculum System, 4-H youth development faculty identified "citizenship" as one of the top areas of work in need of new curricula and resource materials. Additionally, the decision to focus the National 4-H Council's nationwide ad campaign on community service reflects a desire to deepen 4-H's public work and value.

**To do something which others count significant ranks very high among the satisfying and steadying influences in life.**

*—Paul Hanna, educator*

The need to renew and deepen 4-H's public mission is urgent. Recently, many observers of American public life have identified a widespread decline in civic engagement. At the same time there is growing recognition that deep,



broad civic engagement is essential to effectively addressing our many problems and opportunities (Boyte, 1989; Mathews, 1994; Lappé & DuBois, 1994; Chrislip & Larson, 1994; National Commission on Civic Renewal, 1998). Without engaging the diverse perspectives, talents, and energies of all of our people—especially youth—we will not meet the increasingly complex challenges of our time.

From many sources, a promising movement devoted to civic renewal is emerging in American life. Concepts such as “civil society,” “social capital,” “service learning,” “public scholarship,” and “public work” are being developed as intellectual tools for this movement (Berger & Neuhaus, 1996; Barber, 1998; Putman, 1995; Schine, 1997; Veninga & McAfee, 1997; Boyte & Kari, 1997). The shift towards an “assets” rather than a “deficits” approach in youth and community development work has begun to focus attention on how youth can be active contributors in addressing issues of public concern (Kretzmann

& McKnight, 1993; Benson, 1997). In Minnesota, a statewide initiative—led in part by the University of Minnesota Extension Service—is engaging a diverse range of institutions in building active citizenship through “civic organizing” (Michels & Massengale, 1998).

## Conclusion

To meet the challenge of engaging youth in civic renewal work while helping them develop the skills and capacities needed for lifelong public contribution, all youth-related organizations and institutions must embrace a new commitment to deepen their public missions. With its powerful heritage, its far-reaching presence in American life, and its tremendous reservoir of resources and talent, 4-H could and should take a major leadership role in pursuing this commitment. When that happens, those of us in 4-H work can stand and answer the challenge to explain and defend 4-H’s real and potential public value with a new level of dignity and conviction.



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