

IMPACT

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Extension

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Innovative partnership yields high-quality volunteer leadership event

The Situation

Each year the volunteer leaders, faculty and staff from one of Idaho's extension districts are charged with the task of hosting a state 4-H leader forum. The goal is to provide a variety of educational workshops which will empower local personnel to more effectively work with youth and their families. In turn, youth gain a more productive, engaging experience through the 4-H Youth Development program.

As our Northern District team prepared to host the 2010 event, they noted many of the same workshops and educational topics seemed to appear year after year, often given by the same person. A conscious decision was made to provide a fresh approach to what we would offer our Forum participants.

We also noted the total participant numbers trend lower when forum is held in the northern district – due in part to travel costs and volunteer population distribution. Faced with a deteriorating economic situation in January 2009 when planning began, concerns arose regarding whether a sufficient draw could be made state-wide to underwrite the cost of hosting a truly high-quality educational event.

Our Response

As might be typically expected, some conventional discussions existed about opening "our event" so others could attend. However, a small group of county personnel/volunteers stimulated a much broader vision – partnering with another state to jointly host a forum. While some initial resistance was voiced, the group endorsed investigating that option.

Initial contacts with Washington State University extension personnel revealed their state forum was to be held in northeastern Washington in October 2010,



and they were excited about the potential partnership, based on past programming efforts with the panhandle (5 northern counties) region of our district.

Beginning March 2009, our two state groups merged and began using teleconferencing and compressed video technology to meet bi-monthly; committees met more frequently as needed in the year leading up to the forum. Recognizing that each state's past forums had unique attributes, our team employed a great deal of creativity to effectively blend the essential elements together into a unified program.

Through collaborative efforts, state forum handbooks were melded together, a variety of committees were established with joint representation, and program schedules were revamped. The proactive discussions and exchange of ideas between our two states served as a catalyst to new programmatic approaches – building on the strengths of one another.

With a variety of engaging, experiential workshops slated, energetic featured speakers and riveting entertainment secured, on-line registration in place and so much more—our team eagerly awaited hosting the 2010 Bi-State 4-H Leader Forum in Spokane.

Program Outcomes

The 2010 Forum drew 248 volunteers, Extension personnel and associates to the Mirabeau Park Hotel in Washington's Spokane Valley, October 15-17. Idaho accounted for nearly 31% of attendees, which aligned with planning committee projections.

Over 35 different workshops were held on Friday and Saturday, featuring a diverse array of educational topics. Our keynote speaker was Kirk Astroth, Arizona State 4-H Director.

Over two-thirds of participants submitted final Forum evaluations, revealing a positive shift in knowledge gained as a result of their involvement. Attendees noted that training and networking opportunities were their primary motivating factors for participating

Recognizing a human tendency to resist change, we found a vast majority (82%) of attendees were supportive of holding jointly-sponsored forums. Participant comments included:

- “Adding the perspective of how both Washington and Idaho deliver 4-H programs—the similarities and unique approaches—enriched my 4-H experience.”
- “The opportunity to exchange program ideas and build educational networks across state lines is excellent — otherwise we tend to get in a rut of presenting the same topics.”
- “It was a great experience and I think both states learned valuable things for the future by sharing experiences.”

The Future

This inaugural bi-state Forum provided a solid foundation upon which to build. While there is always room for improvement, it clearly demonstrated what is possible through multi-state collaboration. Our evaluation results revealed that 87% of attendees felt multi-state programming should be pursued for other 4-H activities and events.

There is a strong, consistent message that to make the best use of our human and financial resources in serving the needs of our volunteers and youth, collaborations are critical to sustain/grow a vibrant 4-H Youth Development program.

Why is this important? Perhaps one Forum participant put it best—“I bleed green. I grew up in 4-H and I am motivated to volunteer in 4-H because of my passion for what I do and the kids. There are not enough words or studies to capture the

profound impact 4-H has on my life—and the lives of the children we work with.”

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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