

## ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF THE 4-H EXPERIENCE

# Mastery

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### Introduction

Mastery is the process of building wisdom, attitudes, skills, knowledge, perceptions and demonstrations resulting in increased self confidence. It is a tool used to empower youth to learn new skills which ultimately allows them to make positive choices in the future. Young people need opportunities to practice and demonstrate their learning to acquire mastery of a topic. Youth development organizations need to provide learning communities that foster knowledge growth as well as encourage youth to actively participate in building skills for themselves and others. Research of afterschool programs show that learning new cognitive and life skills are important. For example, studies have demonstrated that an intentional learning environment is one of the critical characteristics of successful after-school programs (Eccles, Barber, Stone and Hunt, 2003; Eccles and Gootman, 2002).

Through positive youth development opportunities, youth develop self-confidence that is needed to solve problems and meet challenges they will face in the future. Those early experiences need to be in a safe environment that allows them to pursue their own interests (Kress, 2004). It is through these early skill building activities that youth find talents and proficiencies that can lead to marketable workforce skills.

### Why is mastery important?

When youth have a positive experience involving learning and mastering skills, they feel the sense of success, achievement and creative problem solving. High quality non-formal educational offerings help assure youth are mastering needed skills for the future. Positive youth development programs offer young people a plethora of supervised growth-promoting activities outside of school (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). When youth work together in group settings, it is expected that they will acquire skills and abilities by modeling others (Rosenberg, 2002). Building mastery into a youth program should be intentional and

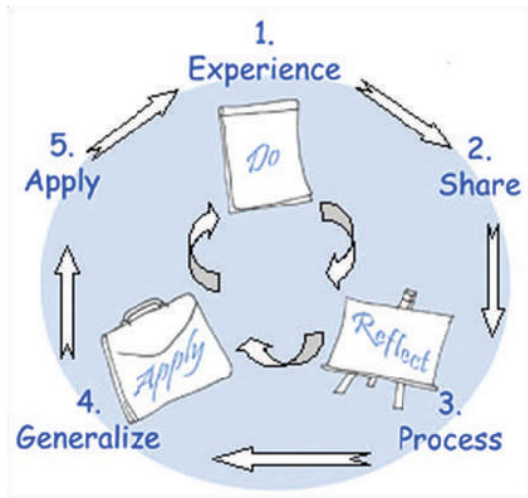
proactive. Over three fourths of the programs in the Roth & Brook-Gunn (2003) study reported life skills training, social skills training, leadership training, and recreation as a part of their planned activities.

Preparing youth for successful adulthood is a paramount issue in today's society (Fraser-Thomas, Cote & Deakin, 2005). Youth need confidence as well as connections to family, community and peers to gain competence in academic, social, and vocational areas (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003).

### What does research show?

According to the National Research Council's report on Community Programs to promote Youth Development, some of the descriptors of opportunities for skill development include: the opportunity to learn physical, intellectual, mental, emotional, and social skills; exposure to intentional learning experiences; opportunities to learn about culture, media literacy, communication skills, and good habits of mind; preparation for adult employment; and opportunities to develop social and cultural skills (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Combining an intentional learning environment with the development of life skills is one of the significant characteristics of a successful program (Kress, 2004).

To further the argument for embedded curriculum—meaning a systematic plan that requires prior planning, practice and performance—similar to the 4-H Curriculum Cooperative System, shows an increase in both social and cultural capital in a young person (Clark, 1988; McLaughlin, 2000). McLaughlin (2000) has looked specifically at programs that specialize in specific skills, such as, art and athletics, and has found that successful programs go further than the topic at hand, rather, they develop positive habits and competencies including life skills. Furthermore, the programs with embedded curriculum, have shown even more success in the ability to acquire skills beyond hitting a ball and painting a picture.



Intentional developmental settings are where youth can sustain positive peer to peer and youth to adult relationships that deliberately focus on building capacity and skills (Perkins & Noam, 2007). Staff demeanor creates an atmosphere where youth are empowered to practice self-determination and to clarify their goals for the future (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). That clarity can come from the process by which staff deliver programs. The Experiential Learning Model (as pictured) is based on Kolb's (1984) work and is the process used in all 4-H Cooperative Curriculum System educational materials. It is based upon stages that begin with 1) doing a common experience, 2) & 3) reflecting upon reactions and observations, 4) & 5) and applying the learning (Enfield, Schmitt-McQuitty, & Smith, 2007).

Evidence shows the importance of learning new cognitive and life skills in school and non-school community programs (Coleman et al., 1966; Clark, 1983, 1988; Comer, 1980, 1988; Murnane and Levy, 1996). Youth activities can serve as critical positive contexts (Rose-Krasnor, et al, 2006). These opportunities mean more than being able to accomplish a task; they are oftentimes tied directly to their sense of self-worth (Clark, 1988). Engaging in meaningful and challenging activities such as helping others through group organizations helps youth have a higher life satisfaction quotient. Through that life satisfaction, youth resist environmental stresses and challenge themselves to grow and prosper (Park, 2004).

Finally, it is the integration of these parts that has true benefit for youth. By pairing the offerings of life skill development with an atmosphere of empowerment that fosters positive supportive relationships, youth have the opportunity to meet their need for healthy development (Roth, Brooks-Gunn, 2003).

## Summary

Mastery is the process over time of building knowledge, skills, attitudes and wisdom while demonstrating their uses. Young people need forums in which to hone their skills. Positive youth development programs allow them

opportunities to build skills, gain confidence, and discover aptitudes as well as potential career fields. The 4-H Youth Development Program allows youth to develop skills, via the experiential learning model, by actively learning, reflecting upon, and applying that knowledge to real life. Through the use of embedded curriculum, positive youth development programs help youth increase their social and cultural capital (Clark, 1988, McLaughlin, 2000). It is the pairing of the experiential learning model and the embedded curriculum which is an example of an intentional positive youth development program plan.

Skill mastery is a vital component necessary in the overall success of youth programs. Teaching knowledge and life skills can enhance the quality of life and enable young people to not only survive, but to thrive in their pursuits. Yet, with any program, it is the synergy of the intentionality of its curriculum, along with the high quality relationships nurtured within, that contribute to the holistic perspective (Ferrari & Turner, 2006).

## Resources

- 4-H Curriculum: <http://4-hcurriculum.org/projectsonline.spx>
- Step Up to Leadership Curriculum: <http://4-hmall.org/Curriculum.aspx>
- 4-H 101 Curriculum: <http://4h.ifas.ufl.edu/Military/4h-101.htm>
- Georgia 4-H Officer Guidelines: [www.georgia4h.org](http://www.georgia4h.org)
- Texas 4-H Parliamentary Procedure: [www.texas4-h.tamu.edu](http://www.texas4-h.tamu.edu)
- Who Wants to be a Parliamentarian?: [www.urbanext.uiuc.edu/who/inside.html](http://www.urbanext.uiuc.edu/who/inside.html)
- Youth Leadership Institute: <http://www.yli.org/>
- 4-H Citizenship Washington Focus: <http://www.citizenshipwashingtonfocus.org/>
- National 4-H Conference: <http://4hconf.4-h.org/about.aspx>
- National 4-H Congress: <http://www.national4-hcongress.com/>

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