



NC 4-H



## Citizenship North Carolina Focus 2008

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The North Carolina 4-H Citizenship NC Focus conference trains teens, ages 15-19, to better understand state government, community partnerships, and public relations. Research indicates that citizenship learning and experience increases teen involvement in their communities that extends to more consistent voting, leadership, and community service during adult years. The three-day conference in Raleigh fosters youth learning about and debate of critical issues in their communities, meeting with elected officials, and planning for community service.

The Third Annual 4-H Citizenship NC Focus conference, June 16-18, 2008 hosted 105 teens, aged 14-18, and 25 adult professionals and volunteers from 43 counties. Eighty-five participants completed an end-of-conference survey, including 18 males and 60 females, of whom 61% were White, 19% Black, 8% Hispanic, 2% Asian, and 10% "Other" or not specified. Conference participants were from all parts of the state, representing rural (17%) and small town (45%) as well as small (9%) and larger (4%) cities and suburbs (8%). Unique features of the conference included a panel of public officials, corporate leaders, and lobbyists on effective communication with decision-makers, a keynote by NC Secretary of State Elaine Marshall on relating to public officials, and a live showing of the public television program "NC Spin." Workshops featured life skills, action planning, asking for funding support, presenting yourself, and insights on understanding the legislative process. Youth worked in county teams to develop community action plans to be implemented during 2008-2009.

**Retrospective: Returning Delegates Affirm Conference Benefits.** The vast majority of the 24 returning delegates agreed that the 2007 conference expanded their knowledge of state government (83%) and collaboration (75%), skills in leadership (79%) and public relations (70%). They reported that the 2007 conference inspired them to seek election (79%) and recruit volunteers (92%). In addition, they had become more involved in citizenship (84%), volunteering (80%), leadership (71%), mentoring (87%), serving on a civic board (79%), and informing others on public issues (75%). Projects completed included community clean-up, Teen Court, helping with elections, teaching a leadership class, and serving on a gang prevention project board. Second-year delegates completed a Retrospective survey at registration for the 2008 conference.

**Prospective: All Delegates Affirm Learning and Aspire to Serve.** Results from the 2008 NC 4-H Citizenship NC Focus event indicate positive gains in knowledge, skills, and readiness for community involvement. A large majority of the 85 youth who completed the end-of-conference survey agreed that they gained a better understanding of state government (87%) and collaboration (81%), and increased skills in leadership (82%) and public relations (84%). A majority of participants aspired to seek election (69%) and recruit volunteers (80%). They also aspired to increase citizenship (84%), volunteering (85%), leadership (82%), mentoring (77%), informing others on public issues (76%), and serving on a civic board (68%). Written comments indicated plans to lead and serve included initiating youth clubs, attending and serving on community boards and 4-H county council, and advocating for public issues with county and state

officials. Retrospective reports from returning delegates suggest that most youth follow through on these aspirations.

Greatest benefits of the conference included better understanding of state government, skills in public relations, and commitment to volunteering. Least cited benefits included seeking election, serving on boards, and understanding collaboratives. Understanding government and interacting with legislators is a unique and significant focus of the conference that seems genuinely appreciated by all participants. Aspirations to volunteering, mentoring, citizenship, and leadership are conference objectives that may be more dependent on opportunities and other commitments anticipated during the coming year. In fact, youth who are currently engaged in such activities, those 4-H youth most likely to be selected as delegates, may be less likely to *increase* involvement in the coming year. Opportunities, experience, and personal preferences may make youth least likely to aspire to seek election, serve on community boards, or inform others about public issues. Knowledge and skill gains, as well as aspirations for leadership and service, affirm that all conference objectives were fulfilled. The pattern of youth feedback reflects perceptions of immediate benefits, emerging opportunities and barriers, and personal goals and preferences. Conference planners may gain greater insight on these patterns from more in-depth examination of youth motivations and experiences beyond the conference. A better understanding of the impact of this once-a-year event on day-to-day competencies and choices may help improve both the conference experience and year-round opportunities and support to youth engaged in citizenship activities.

***Nine of ten youth reported that they had fun, learned more about citizenship, learned from their legislator visit, and felt more capable to approach citizenship projects year-round. Youth development research indicates that teens learn best through playful but challenging interaction focused on a specific theme. Participants concur that 4-H Citizenship North Carolina Focus provides an oasis of learning in downtown Raleigh.***

Comparisons by gender found differences on aspirations to leadership ( $p = .002$ ), volunteering ( $p = .001$ ), and mentoring ( $p = .003$ ). In all cases, females' aspirations were higher. No significant differences were found by ethnic group, age group, or Extension district (e.g., region of the state). Conference planners may want to examine why a lower number of males participate in the conference and express lower aspirations to leadership and service. Males represent a smaller percentage (approximately 40%) of high school 4-Hers, but may enjoy more options, face more barriers, or find this event less attractive than females.

***Conference Climate.*** Participants valued the conference quality affirming strong adult support, inclusion of youth from all backgrounds, and encouragement of responsibility and social action. Over ninety percent of participants agreed that they “learned to accept differences in others” and “felt they could make a difference.” Nearly all participants reported that they were supported by adults, challenged to grow, become more responsible, and broaden their view of the world. Continued support from sponsors and 4-H professionals underlines the positive feedback and activity of youth.

***Support.*** NC Electric Cooperatives, Touchstone Energy Cooperatives is signature sponsor.

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