



4-H Congress 2008 NC Spin and Citizenship Activities

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North Carolina 4-H Congress, an annual, weeklong residential teen conference focused on citizenship, leadership, and service. A 2003 review committee reaffirmed the conference mission and a 2006 evaluation of youth participants reported high levels of program quality and outcomes for the overall event. Subsequently, conference planners sought to better understand youth experiences and benefits of specific activities during the event. Conference planners invested substantial resources in the “NC Spin” panel on political issues in 2008 and wanted to know youth audience response to the event.

In addition to the 2 hour panel and subsequent question-and-answer period, youth also participated in a on hour “Citizenship Carnival” featuring four activities coordinated by district-level officers: 1) A “roving reporter” who asked about the state’s economy, education, and nutritional health; 2) Ten-item Citizenship Test samples from the Immigration and Naturalization Service; 3) graffiti wall for descriptions of local citizenship projects; and 4) graffiti table to design creative advertisements for citizenship activities. A brief survey explored responses to the panel discussion, including qualitative comments. Carnival activities were documented at the sites. Data from both events are reviewed below.

Evaluation of NC Spin Panel. Youth participants were asked four questions about the political issues panel to determine its relevance and value to them. Of the approximately 580 participants at the event, 153 surveys were submitted from youth representing 46 of the 89 participating counties. Counties were disproportionately represented, with Stokes (N = 11), Orange (N = 10) submitting the most surveys and youth of several counties submitting no surveys. Participant ages ranged from 12 to 19, with 59% under 16 and 41% age 16 and over. Thirty-three percent of participants were male, 64% female (3% missing data). Participant years in 4-H ranged from 0 (first year) to 14 years, with the mean years at 5.26 and a median of 5.0 years. Participant responses to the NC Spin event are summarized below, by mean score and percentage:

1. NC Spin was:

Engaging	21%
Interesting	50%
Boring	28%
(Missing data	1%)

2. Participating in NC Spin:

Gave me a whole new view of citizenship	22%
Added a little to my view of citizenship	61%
Didn't add anything to what I already knew	16%
(Missing data	1%)

3. NC Spin discussion time:

Let my voice be heard	28%
Let a few people blow off steam	45%
Was a total waste	19%
(Other comments [written in])	3%
(Missing data)	4%

The survey also asked youth to check off on a series of statements about their citizenship activities through the year (checking all that apply). Percentage of respondents replying in the affirmative are shown below:

4. 4-H Citizenship activities through the year

Let my voice be heard	52%
Helped me understand and contribute to my community	73%
Help my community understand 4-H and youth	57%
Give me something to write down in a record book	46%
Will look good on a college or job application	75%
Are the least important part of my 4-H work	12%
Are limited because there are few opportunities	16%

Participant comments, from approximately one-third of the total respondents, about the event were mixed. A minority of youth were enthusiastic about the event, indicating that it was interesting, raised their interest in public issues, and gave them a better understanding of the political process. Several advocates agreed with detractors that the event was a little too long and boring at points. Several mentioned that they would have preferred a more interactive format. On the positive side, many considered the panel interesting, informative, helpful in understanding politics, and helpful in understanding a variety of issues, including those relevant to teenagers. Many appreciated opportunities to speak their mind or hear others' views on subjects covered. However, negative comments tended to favor making all or part of the activity optional, giving interested participants as much time as they desired to delve into and discuss issues. Advocates were excited about the opportunity for youth to express their views. The lack of complaints suggests that youth did not feel that any particular view would be suppressed. As might be expected in a group of teenagers, many cards contained doodles or side conversations. Unfortunately, a majority of cards submitted offered no comments.

Summary of Survey Feedback

Survey participants were generally engaged (21%) or interested (50%) in the NC Spin panel but many (28%) were bored. However, both advocates and detractors of the event noted that it was too long and not interactive enough to keep many involved for an extended time. Comments from advocates mentioned that the panel was "interesting...informational... Almost a quarter (22%) gained a whole new view of citizenship, a majority (61%) gained a little, and only 16% felt the event added nothing to citizenship knowledge. Almost three in ten (28%) indicated that the event allowed their voice to be heard and more (45%) said that others' voices were heard, but a significant minority (19%) saw the event as a waste of time.

Descriptions of year-round citizenship did not ask the number or types of activities in which respondents engaged. However, 73% felt such activities helped them better understand and contribute to their community, 57% felt such activities helped the community better understand 4-H and youth, and 52% agreed that citizenship activities

“let their voice be heard.” Seventy-five percent were aware that citizenship activities would benefit them on college applications while 46% agreed that such events would enhance 4-H record books. Only 12% identified citizenship as the least important element of their 4-H work. Finally, 16% indicated that there were too few opportunities for citizenship in their communities. Since only a minority of participants submitted surveys, it is not clear how accurately these figures reflect overall participant opinion. However, given the high number of respondents (153), results reported probably reflect general trends across the group who attended.

Citizenship Carnival. Following the NC Spin event, four activities, led by youth officers, were available to extend learning and expression about citizenship and community service. Results and comment on these activities are reviewed below.

1) A “roving reporter” asking about the state’s economy, education, and nutritional health. Relatively few comments were gathered but responses reflected understanding of some key issues in each category. Five comments were gathered on the economy, each reflecting a different theme, including immigration, unemployment, job fairs, taking advantage of local opportunities (unclear whether this targeted an individual [e.g., employment or entrepreneurship] or community [e.g., cultivate industry] level), and collaboration, which seemed to suggest community efforts to cultivate industry. The four comments about education also addressed different themes such as academic levels, extracurricular or after school activities, background checks on teachers, and standardized testing. Two questions on healthy lifestyles garnered eight comments. Respondents agreed that unhealthy eating and exercise habits were common, with some citing fast food options and others mentioning personal responsibility as the prime cause. Solutions suggested ranged from healthcare meetings to making healthy food tastier and more affordable to playing sports.

2) Fifty-five Citizenship Test samples (10 items) from the Immigration and Naturalization Service were completed. Procedures for conducting and checking quizzes were informal, thus no record of multiples (e.g., more than one quiz per person), corrections (e.g., writing in of correct answers), or omissions (e.g., quizzes not submitted) is available. Relatively few of the quizzes submitted were 100% correct.

3) Local citizenship and service project descriptions were encouraged on a graffiti wall. A total of 17 respondents cited activities ranging from general community service (no specific activity (3) to specific activities such as making blankets or toys (3), or clean-up or landscaping (3), visiting or assisting senior citizens (3), helping the needy (1), voting and helping others to vote (2), and talking to or working with the state legislature (2). Two youth cited record keeping or advancement follow-up for documenting service work. A number of comments also cited Scouts or faith-based groups, but were not clear if these were non-4-H activities or collaborations with 4-H.

4) Creative advertisements for citizenship activities were the focus of a graffiti table. Almost no comments and drawings on these sheets related to citizenship and community service. Most ideas were simple and straightforward: “I love 4-H,” or “It’s fun, join 4-H.” Citizenship and service related graphics included “Get educated” (next to an American flag with a ‘Made in China’ tag), “4-H educates,” and “4-H = Lifetime Opportunities.” Most other entries were personal or general in nature.

Summary of Citizen Carnival Feedback

Citizenship Carnival events were relatively sparsely attended. The number and depth of comments suggests that respondents were unclear or uncommitted to completing the activities as presented. The roving reporter gathered only a few comments about the economy, education, and health, but those reflected awareness of key issues. Citizenship Quiz results, if reliable, suggest that youth may need much basic skills learning in the foundations of American democracy. Responses to the "Graffiti" activities suggest that relatively little citizenship or service work is occurring in 4-H or that a better format is needed to share experiences and ideas across counties.

Conclusions and Implications

Survey participants were generally interested or engaged in the NC Spin panel but most felt that the event was too long and not interactive enough to keep many involved for an extended time. Although only one-third of respondents added comments, affirmative statements on the value of the event for sparking interest, offering information, and provoking thought outweighed negative comments. Most youth gained at least some citizenship knowledge and found the exchange of ideas interesting or affirming. Of those responding to the survey, a majority view citizenship as a reciprocal relationship of understanding and giving between young people and their communities. Moreover, they are not unaware of its benefits in establishing their reputation with colleges and the 4-H organization, via record books.

A response rate of less than half the event participants is problematic. However, completed surveys contained almost all requested information. Only 2% omitted county name and age or any specific item. Comments were constructive, although many were general (e.g., "very interesting," "boring") rather than specific. The "mini-survey" approach appears to be effective, if only in occasional application.

The Citizenship Carnival event following NC Spin drew relatively few youth as active participants. Perhaps the level of participation reflects the boredom or fatigue mentioned in NC Spin comments. The roving reporter gathered several insightful comments about the economy, education, and health, but was able to reach only a few participants. Additional reporters, prepared to ask probing questions, may have gathered more impressions and provided a more accurate cross-section of youth opinion. The Citizenship quiz attracted considerable interest. Responses submitted suggest substantial understanding of the foundations of citizenship but also reveal significant gaps in knowledge, particularly on "fill in the blank" items. A broader audience and more consistent answer check-off may provide a useful profile of citizenship knowledge among 4-Hers. This data could guide further curriculum and service activities at the county, district, and state level. Several interesting stories and ideas were shared via the "Graffiti" activities. However, the extent and depth of responses suggests that very little citizenship and service is occurring or that a better strategy is needed to invite and guide submissions.

All Citizenship Carnival activities held promise to expand upon the themes and applications of the NC Spin event and provide insight on the scope and creativity of county 4-H citizenship and service activities. Networking, idea-sharing, and building of collaborative and mentoring relationships represents a significant benefit of 4-H statewide events. Events that use this forum effectively can be powerful sources for

collegiality, innovation, and impact across the state. Adult and youth leaders will be challenged to reflect on these experiences and consider how to alter their format or timing to maximize their potential.

Additional observations of the context and responses for both NC Spin and Citizenship Carnival would be helpful in thoroughly describing the experience, making conclusions and recommendations regarding program improvements. Perhaps this information can be gathered and discussed in subsequent weeks via youth officer meetings or electronic feedback systems.

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