Cabin Leader Program Continues to Help Youth Develop Leadership Skills

The Situation
The University of Idaho, the Idaho Association of Soil Conservation Districts, and the Natural Resources Conservation Service sponsor a Natural Resources Workshop for youth (ages 12 to 14) and schoolteachers every June at the Central Idaho 4-H Camp (north of Ketchum, ID). One of the goals of the camp is to develop leadership potential in youth who return to camp as cabin leaders. Campers apply to be future cabin leaders, and are invited back to camp as cabin leaders because of their leadership potential. The problem was that no program was in place to train or evaluate these youth and their effectiveness as leaders. It was decided that a program needed to be developed to train and evaluate the cabin leaders on a yearly basis. After two years of programming, it was realized that although the training has been effective, we needed to evaluate our returning cabin leaders differently, and some of them were ready for greater leadership challenges.

Our Response
The cabin leaders and Counselors-In Training (CIT) were brought together on two separate six-hour days for training and planning of camp activities. We firmly believe that youth can plan and deliver programs if given the opportunity.

In 2006, the fifth year of the revised program, we invited 16 youth (8 girls and 8 boys) to participate. These youth ranged in age from 13 to 17 and their experience ranged from first year to fifth year cabin leaders. During the training, faculty worked with the youth on developing programming skills (i.e., ice breaker activities, songs, and games), group facilitation and teamwork skills, and listening and problem-solving skills. These active, hands-on sessions also included time for food, socializing, and team building. The staff and cabin leaders worked extensively on building a cohesive team that could work together smoothly during a high-energy week.

At camp, the cabin leaders helped the instructors during lab time, assisted during R&R sessions, and took major roles during morning and evening programs, and other times when the campers were not scheduled with instructors.

Program Outcomes
The outcomes easiest to observe were from those cabin leaders who were back for a successive year. Based on performance of the previous year, these cabin leaders were more prepared to handle difficult situations and take more of a leadership role without
being guided to do so. Also, the two CIT’s met the challenge of additional work and responsibility. The ultimate goal with the CIT will be that they are prepared enough to take over as head counselors at this or another camp, possibly giving them a summer employment opportunity.

For first year cabin leaders, an evaluation questionnaire was developed that asked about 15 identified leadership traits. The cabin leaders were asked for each trait how often they used these skills before the workshop and how often they will use these skills after the workshop. Results show a statistically significant increase in the probability of the cabin leaders use of all 15 skills. The results for first-year cabin leaders from 2006 were combined with the results gathered since 2002 (the first year the instrument was used) in order to view developing trends in the various leadership skills. Those traits that youth indicated they would use the most after three years of results are “Dealing with difficult people,” “Group problem-solving and Decision-making,” and “Stress Management.” This is not surprising as these are areas where much training and reinforcement take place.

In 2004, we also developed five open-ended questions for the returning cabin leaders to answer. These questions allow the youth to discuss their experience more freely. The questions centered on whether they believed the trainings and the camp had helped build their leadership skills independently from other activities in which they may be involved. As a group, the returning cabin leaders indicated involvement in the trainings and the opportunity to lead at camp had built their leadership skills and given them challenges that they had not been given through other activities.

As a result of this training, the cabin leaders are more prepared to take on their camp roles. The Leadership Development and Counselor-In-Training program helped the cabin leaders to be prepared to handle the day-to-day situations within their individual cabin groups, as well as make meaningful contributions to the camp program as a whole. Also, the adult staff at camp can interact better with the cabin leaders because each has a defined role and is knowledgeable of the others responsibility. Each year the cabin leaders have the opportunity to make a difference in their camper’s lives, as well as with the other campers that they interact with.

For More Information
Steven L. Hines, Extension Educator
University of Idaho Extension—Lincoln County
115 West A St
Box 608
Shoshone, ID 83352
208-886-2406
Fax: 208-886-2407
Email: shines@uidaho.edu
(updated for 2006)
37-06shines-cabin.doc
11/06