Camp counselors gain leadership skills through training program

The Situation
In the Treasure Valley area of the Southern Extension District, 4-H Camp Counselors are recruited to plan, execute and evaluate the overnight 4-H camp program. In partnership with the Camp Director and several adult partners, (including Extension faculty, staff and volunteers) the 9th through 12th grade counselors take the lead on delivering two Kids Camps (3rd – 5th grade campers) and one Teen Camp (6th – 8th grade campers) during the summer. In preparation for this immense responsibility, counselors begin attending training and planning sessions in February each year.

Teen counselors need to understand the ages and stages of youth development, risk management practices, group management principles, and workshop teaching strategies. In addition, counselors need to be able to work together effectively as a group. To do this they need to utilize a variety of communication styles, understand how to be responsible for themselves, practice good decision making, and develop good leadership skills. To some, these come naturally and just need to be refined, to others these skills are learned.

Our Response
Camp Counselor planning and training sessions begin in February with a counselor-in-training meeting for first time counselors to introduce the basics of child protection, risk management, and outline the expectations of counselors. The subsequent meetings include all teen counselors. Planning/training meetings are held for the counselors every three to four weeks up to the counselor retreat in June which is held at the camp facility outside of Donnelly.

In addition to planning the camp theme, schedule, workshops, focus groups, and other camp activities, the counselor training program also prepares teens to supervise a group of campers in their cabin, help campers develop and nurture friendships with each other, and facilitate groups of younger children to have positive experiences at camp. Counselors have the responsibility of keeping the campers and themselves safe (physically and emotionally) throughout camp. Instead of focusing on specific outcomes, the counselor training program focuses on developing the life skills of leadership, decision making, and self responsibility so that the counselors may analyze situations as they occur and respond appropriately. Activities and processes during the training program help youth develop these life skills so counselors can then use these skills throughout the training program and the camps.
Program Outcomes
In order to document the impact of the counselor training program, Extension Educators Nancy Shelstad and Brian Luckey used the WSU Life Skills Evaluation Tool to specifically target counselors’ growth in the areas of leadership, decision making, and self responsibility. Fifteen youth were administered surveys which asked them to rate on a scale of 1 to 4 their growth in a specific indicator from the beginning of the program to the end. The 15 youth were surveyed at the Camp Counselor evaluation meeting at the end of the camping season and are a representative cross-section of teens who participated in the program.

As a group, the counselors surveyed showed positive growth in all three life skills. Youth reported the greatest amount of improvement in their leadership skills, then decision making, followed by self responsibility. For example, when asked how well they had learned how to use different leadership styles, they went from an average of 2.53 to 3.53, the greatest growth of any indicator. Counselors surveyed also felt they had effectively learned how to organize a group to meet a goal (beginning average of 3.07 to ending average of 3.60) and how to get other counselors to share in leadership (2.60 to 3.27). Respondents reported similar, but lessened, growth in decision making skills. Youth surveyed grew in their abilities to list options before making a decision (2.40 to 2.87) and evaluate decisions they make (2.93 to 3.40). Conversely, a relatively low increase in self responsibility may have less to do with the camp counselor training program and more to do with the strong concept of self that 4-H in general gives to youth.

This was the first time to conduct the life skills survey with camp counselors in the Treasure Valley Area. The positive results show that the counselor training program is having a desired impact on teens that will carry throughout their lifetime. The results also indicate that it is important to communicate with camp counselors about the life skills they are developing in the program. Training sessions emphasize leadership development constantly, but skills in decision making and self responsibility are not similarly stressed. This may explain why counselors surveyed reported lesser gains in those areas.

The camp counselor training program is instrumental to the success of the camps held at the Cascade Lake 4-H Camp. The survey will be administered to counselors in future years to measure the effectiveness of the camp counselor planning and training program, and to help the camp director and UI Extension faculty, staff, and volunteers to continue to deliver a program that grows life skills in the young people who participate.

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