

Challenges of Service-learning in Tennessee 4-H Youth Development: A Delphi Study

Critique

James E. Dyer
University of Florida

Because of the limitation on the number of pages that authors may submit, it is often necessary to compose manuscripts that divide a study into parts in order to publish findings for each of the major variables in the study. The choice that authors often face is to omit some variables in the study (which misrepresents the research that was actually conducted), or to pen companion articles that disseminate the research (which is often criticized as duplicate publications/presentations). Although this is a companion article to the previous paper, no criticism should be leveled at the authors. However, changes in paper format (specifically page limits) may be appropriate since NAERC no longer publishes hardcopies of accepted manuscripts. Both this paper and the preceding one would have been greatly strengthened had the authors been given more latitude in the presenting their research findings by extending the page limitation currently in place. Having made that point, the purpose of this component of the study was to identify the challenges of service-learning in Tennessee 4-H Youth Development, and to describe the perceived differences among the 4-H members, volunteers, and Extension agents who served as panel members in this Delphi study.

Interestingly, the authors chose to use the standard deviation of items as the reference point for determining consensus. Although valid, an explanation of the rationale on using this measure over other choices would be interesting. Reference should be made to the previous critique for general comments about the methodology used in the study.

This component of the study offered some interesting findings. Whereas many of the findings concerning benefits of service learning were shared by the three groups, the challenges perceived by each group proved to be largely unique to each group. For example, of the nine items on which consensus was reached by the 4-H Youth sub-panel, only three of those items were considered to be a challenge by the Volunteers, and only two of the items were challenges as perceived by the Extension agents. Also, only three of the items considered to be challenges by the two adult groups were common to both groups. This finding may appropriately lead to a recommendation for a follow-up qualitative study that focuses on an explanation of why some challenges exist. One of the benefits of the Delphi technique is that it often produces results that focus research efforts. This study has afforded that opportunity.

Again, the authors are to be commended for conducting active research that attempts to answer questions leading to the improvement of programs. As noted by the authors, the study has implications for leaders, both youth and adult, who employ service-learning as a teaching tool.