

Abstract

The 4-H Administrative Burden Study investigates the administrative burden on county 4-H faculty, focusing on compliance tasks unique to 4-H programming. Using a statewide survey of 54 respondents, this study examines variations in workload based on factors like FTE, county size, and support. The research categorizes tasks into five compliance areas: volunteer screening, risk management, fiscal oversight, civil rights, and staff/volunteer supervision. The study is grounded in frameworks such as human performance technology, cognitive apprenticeship, self-determination theory, and change communication, emphasizing efficient, skill-based interventions.

Initial findings highlight inefficiencies like process bottlenecks and inadequate training resources, with compliance-related tasks consuming significant time—up to 46% for risk management. These insights will inform streamlined workflows, job aids, and training modules. By addressing administrative challenges, the project aims to reduce workload, enabling agents to focus on youth development, volunteer recruitment, and impactful community engagement, thus enhancing the sustainability and reach of 4-H programming.

Purpose:

The purpose of this study was to document and quantify the administrative burden on county 4-H faculty, focusing on compliance tasks unique to 4-H programming. These findings will guide interventions to improve efficiency, redesign job roles, and inform staffing decisions. Specifically, the study addresses differences in administrative burden based on FTE, county support, county size, experience, and task type. The research questions that guided this study include:

1. Are there significant differences in the administrative burden based on full-time equivalent (FTE)?
2. Are there significant differences in administrative burden based on level of county support?
3. Are there significant differences in administrative burden based on size of county?
4. Are there significant differences in administrative burden based on years of experience with 4-H?
5. Are there significant differences in types of administrative burden?

Review of Literature:

The administrative burden faced by Extension agents, particularly in 4-H programming, reflects a longstanding challenge in balancing compliance responsibilities with program delivery. Needs assessments, stakeholder engagement, and program evaluation are essential components of effective Extension work (Seevers et al., 1997; Franz, 2009). However, these tasks require agents to possess specialized skills in qualitative and quantitative methodologies, data interpretation, and consensus-building (Lakai et al., 2012; Arnold & Place, 2010). Research underscores the importance of robust support systems and streamlined processes to address these challenges effectively.

Volunteer screening, a key compliance area, demands careful attention to detail and adherence to policies, often creating bottlenecks at both state and county levels. Studies highlight the value of clear guidelines, timely communication, and targeted training in mitigating these challenges (Franz et al., 2014). Similarly, risk management and fiscal compliance require agents to navigate complex organizational structures and legal requirements, necessitating tailored job aids and ongoing professional development (Telg & Irani, 2012).

The cognitive apprenticeship model (Collins et al., 1989) and human performance technology (HPT) model (Stolovitch & Keeps, 1999) provide theoretical frameworks for addressing these challenges. The cognitive apprenticeship model emphasizes learning through authentic experiences and guided practice, which is particularly relevant for mastering compliance tasks. HPT, on the other hand, offers a systematic approach to enhancing productivity and competence by integrating behavioral psychology, instructional design, and organizational development. These models, alongside self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which emphasizes intrinsic motivation, and change communication theory (Lewis, 2011), form the foundation for developing effective interventions.

Further, research by Arnold et al. (2020) identifies program evaluation as a critical component of improving 4-H program delivery. Effective evaluation not only measures outcomes but also communicates program value to stakeholders and funders, a task that is often underutilized in Extension work. Studies also emphasize the importance of aligning compliance tasks with

institutional priorities and providing agents with tools to manage these responsibilities without compromising their capacity for youth development and community engagement (Franz & Townson, 2008).

Methodology:

A statewide survey of 54 county 4-H faculty gathered data on administrative workload through a structured questionnaire. Respondents represented five regions and had varying levels of FTE and experience. Tasks were categorized into five compliance areas: volunteer screening, risk management, fiscal oversight, civil rights, and staff/volunteer supervision. Quantitative data captured time allocation and resource availability, while qualitative feedback identified recurring themes like process bottlenecks, state-level support, and communication gaps.

Expected Results/Outcomes:

Findings are expected to show:

1. Significant variations in workload based on FTE, county size, and level of support.
2. Disproportionate time spent on compliance tasks, particularly in risk management (46%) and fiscal oversight (40%).
3. Key bottlenecks and inefficiencies, such as delays in state processes and inadequate training resources.

This data will inform strategies to streamline workflows, enhance training, and justify structural changes, such as increasing administrative support or redistributing responsibilities.

Educational Impact and Contribution to Youth Development:

Reducing the administrative burden on 4-H agents will enable them to dedicate more time to core educational responsibilities like youth development, volunteer recruitment, and community engagement. Enhanced efficiency in compliance processes will free agents to focus on programming that fosters leadership, civic engagement, and life skills among youth. Furthermore, providing clear, accessible resources for compliance will empower agents and volunteers, improving program sustainability and community impact.

Discussion, Implications, and Conclusions:

The findings underscore the need for systemic changes to alleviate administrative burdens unique to 4-H. Simplified processes, clear job aids, and strategic support at the state level could significantly reduce inefficiencies. Training interventions, such as evergreen or on-demand modules, would address skill gaps and enhance capacity. By reallocating time from administrative tasks to program delivery, 4-H agents can achieve greater reach and impact, addressing youth needs more effectively. These findings hold broader implications for Extension programming, providing a framework to balance administrative duties with educational priorities across disciplines. This research represents a crucial step toward creating equitable workloads and sustainable careers in Extension work.

January 31, 2025

Dear Awards Committee,

It is with great enthusiasm that I write this letter in support for Dr. Heather Kent's application for recognition through the NAE4-HYDP Susan Barkman Award for Research and Evaluation. Heather's research has not only highlighted critical challenges but also provided actionable insights to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of 4-H programming.

This study is commendable for its rigorous approach to identifying and quantifying the time-intensive compliance tasks faced by 4-H agents. By categorizing these tasks into key compliance areas—volunteer screening, risk management, fiscal oversight, civil rights, and staff/volunteer supervision—Heather has provided a comprehensive framework that illustrates the unique challenges of 4-H programming. Her findings offer a roadmap for systemic improvements that can significantly reduce inefficiencies and improve agent capacity.

The practical implications of this study cannot be overstated. Interventions informed by this study allows our most valuable resource- people- to focus on our core mission: fostering youth development, recruiting and supporting volunteers, and building impactful community programs. By addressing the administrative hurdles that hinder program expansion, Heather's work directly contributes to the long-term growth and sustainability of 4-H.

This study exemplifies the highest standards of research and innovation within Extension work; findings and recommendations have already begun to influence positive changes and contribute to the larger body of literature. I strongly support Dr. Heather Kent's application for this award and believe her research deserves recognition for its profound impact on the 4-H community and beyond.

Sincerely,



Dr. Julie Pigott Dillard
CED/4-H Agent in Washington County & Interim DED, Northwest District