
4-H Center for Youth Development

FOCUS is a monograph that provides an extensive, timely review on a critical subject area in child development, program development, research, and education



FOCUS

The University of California at Davis

Organizing Head, Heart, Hands and Health for Larger Service:

The Public Value of 4-H Youth Development Work



author
Scott Peters
University of Minnesota

Imagine the following scene. At a public hearing, a group of county commissioners and other citizens are mulling over the proposed budget for their county for the following year. In recent years, the economy has been good, so the budget process has been relatively smooth. But the future seems increasingly uncertain, and fears that tighter times might be coming have made several commissioners nervous about the sustainability of the county's current budget. Additionally, new concerns are being raised about the appropriateness of using tax money to fund certain kinds of work. Maybe some things shouldn't be funded by taxpayers, some commissioners are saying. Maybe some things should be funded through the private marketplace, or through voluntary contributions. Other commissioners express skepticism about the value of some publicly funded work, questioning whether it's resulting in any tangible outcomes that benefit the public.

In the course of the hearing, one first-term commissioner, a relative newcomer to the county, points to the item on the budget that calls for funds for Cooperative Extension and 4-H work. She looks perplexed.

"Why are we using taxpayers' money to fund 4-H work?" she asks. Turning to members of the county Extension committee, she asks questions that no one can remember having ever been asked so directly before: "What is the public value of 4-H? What does it contribute to the life and well-being of our county?"

Here is a crucial challenge that cuts to the heart of our mission in 4-H youth development work. What is—or what could be—the public value of 4-H in today's world? In a time marked by a growing concern over the health of our public life, a growing scrutiny of publicly funded work, and a growing struggle with questions of diversity and inclusion, how will we choose to answer this question? What exactly is or could be 4-H's contribution to the building of a vibrant and just public life?

There is, of course, no single correct or best answer to the question of 4-H's public value and work. A range of answers can and have been given to this question, reflecting a diversity of perspectives, values, and experiences. Yet while we must continue to search for answers for ourselves as we attempt to meet today's challenges and opportunities, we should not neglect the insights,