

Interns in Action: Enhancing 4-H Camp Experiences Through Peer Leadership and Engagement

Introduction

Experiential learning that combines youth mentorship with practical agricultural experiences effectively fosters both leadership skills and confidence in career decision-making among students (Anderson II et al., 2009; Coleman et al., 2024; Parrella et al., 2023). The NEXTGen Interns program at [university] places and funds student interns to work with youth at 4-H camps in [state]. The interns bring energy and innovation to 4-H youth by engaging youth in hands-on learning and showcasing the broad range of topics within agriculture and natural resources. The program is an excellent example of using teaching tools like experiential learning, peer mentorship, and career exploration to promote positive youth development and prepare young people for future opportunities in the agriculture workforce.

Actions in Work

Interns majoring in agriculture were placed at three 4-H camping locations in [state] (east, middle, and west) from May to July 2025. 4-H camp programs are five days in length with 10 weeks of programming. During the 10-week camping season, over 6,000 youth in grades 4th-8th participated. Interns were trained by camp staff and directors, then led workshops, supported day-to-day programming, and built meaningful relationships with youth as peer mentors. As noted from the following roles and experiences, their work reflected a blend of personal strengths and professional interests in agriculture that allowed them to apply agricultural learning experiences that strengthened the bridge between higher education and 4-H youth development.

- **Intern A** served as a storyteller for the camp community, documenting daily life through photography and video. “It’s exciting to document their journeys and share their stories,” she shared. “I’m constantly amazed by how many kids are passionate about agriculture, wildlife, and more.” Her visual storytelling captured moments of discovery, creativity, and friendship.
- **Intern B** also contributed behind the camera, helping highlight the energy of camp life. “My photos help capture the fun and growth campers experience,” she explained. “I also assist with activities like zip-lining, Biodiversity Buzz, and low ropes. My role is both creative and hands-on, which keeps me connected to every part of camp life.”

- **Intern C** found her spot in the craft house, where she helped youth tap into their creative side. “I love working in the craft house,” she said. “I get to see the children break out of their shells, become creative, and make memories that will last them a lifetime.”
- **Intern D** supported both health services and enrichment sessions. She helped organize camper medications at the nurse’s station. “It’s taught me to be more detail-oriented,” she reflected. “Between sessions, I also capture special moments, like canoeing, zip-lining, and crafting with friends.”
- **Intern E** used her platform to bridge agriculture with entrepreneurship. “I’ve helped campers manage funds, gain life skills, and see their talents as potential income. This experience sharpened my teaching and business skills and reminded me why I chose agriculture, to show that there are so many ways to thrive in the ag world.”

Faculty and Staff Mentor Observations as to “Why it Matters”

Faculty and staff mentors observed that integrating college students into 4-H camp settings offered a meaningful way to connect academic learning with real-world application. As near-peer mentors, interns help make agriculture more relatable for youth, sparking interest through hands-on activities that reflect the wide range of opportunities in the field. In follow-up interviews, interns shared that campers respond positively to their energy and authenticity, and as a result, campers begin to view agriculture as something meaningful and relevant to their own lives.

For faculty and staff mentors, offering internship opportunities allowed students to grow beyond the classroom. In their closing interviews, interns were asked to reflect on their growth over the summer. They reported strengthened leadership, communication, and teaching skills through the valuable experiences in youth development and community engagement.

These real-world learning environments help students clarify their career goals and develop transferable skills that are essential in the agriculture and Extension workspace. Supporting internships is not only an investment in student success, but it also directly contributes to strengthening the future agricultural workforce.

Summary

Interns energize youth development programs by leading hands-on agricultural activities and mentoring youth. Their creativity and enthusiasm help campers explore careers, build confidence, and see agriculture as relevant to their lives. At the same time, interns strengthen their own leadership, communication, and teaching skills, gaining valuable experiences that shape career goals and prepare them for future roles in agriculture and Extension. These internships not only support student growth but also reinforce connections between the university and local communities, ensuring a strong pipeline for the agricultural workforce.

References

Anderson II, J. C., & Kim, E. (2009). Youth Leadership Development: Perceptions and Preferences of Urban Students Enrolled in a Comprehensive Agriculture Program. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 50(1), 8–20. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2009.01008>

Coleman, B., Bunch, J., & Roberts, T. G. (2024). Experiential learning in agricultural education: A philosophical discussion. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 65(1), 283–302. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.v65i1.2479>

Parrella, J. A., Esquivel, C., Leggette, H. R., & Murphrey, T. P. (2023). Preparing agricultural leaders: an assessment of agricultural students' perceived importance and development of employability skills. *The Journal of Agricultural Education and Extension*, 30(2), 233–255. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1389224X.2023.2179086>

Submitted by:

Lana Petrie, Thomas Broyles, John Ricketts
Tennessee State University
Nashville, TN