4-H Career Explorations
Promising Practices

The goals of the 4-H Career Explorations Conference include sparking youth interest in careers and career pathways and helping them develop academic, leadership, and life skills. In addition to the positive youth development principles that underlie all our 4-H programs, here is some research that informs our overall conference design and can help Program Facilitators design their Focus and University U programs.

The Career Exploration Process
Career exploration is at the same time learning about one’s self and the world of work and how these interact to help a person achieve their goals. In this process, a young person tries to understand who they are and what they want, what jobs are appealing to them, and what they can contribute to the world in exchange for what they want.¹

Career exploration may be either diversive or specific. In diversive career exploration, which usually happens earlier in the career development process, a person is learning about the world of work in general and about themselves, with a focus on novel and stimulating careers. Specific career exploration involves combining learning about work and one’s self to understand what careers realistically aligned with one’s identity, interests, and talents. People engage in both kinds of career explorations - diversive to find career alternatives and specific to choose one that works best for them.²

Influential Factors
Here are some of the most salient factors that influence the career development process for young people.

Self – Youth view aspects of their identity (including race, ethnicity, gender, etc.) as important resources for educational and career planning.³ Career exploration also involves discovering and developing their skills and talents⁴ and figuring out how they define work.⁵

Young people can developing a sense of “work hope” where youth identify career goals, strategies for reaching those goals (career pathways) and willingness to act on those goals (agency). Work hope can be motivating for youth and provide a personal connection to career exploration questions.⁶

Possible selves can also be a resource in this process.⁷ Possible selves include what a person would like to become (hoped-for selves), what they believe they could become (expected selves), and what they are afraid of becoming (feared selves). Helping youth learn about and expand their possible selves may support career exploration. However, possible selves may have different influences on youth with different backgrounds. Youth of minority backgrounds often demonstrate a gap between their expected self and their hoped-for self, while those of middle-class white youth are typically identical.⁸

Family – Young people may make career choices based on family expectations or how they define their role in their family’s collective identity. They may choose a particular career because a valued relative stressed its advantages.⁹ For example, families may encourage STEM careers because of financial reward.¹⁰

Peers – Friends with similar interests can encourage a young person’s career exploration process,¹¹ for example by highlighting the advantages of a particular career.¹² Friends can also make career exploration more difficult. Friends sometimes have mixed reactions to STEM, which can be challenging for youth interested in STEM careers.¹³
Role models – Because youth often have little work experience, they define work based on their parents, families, and role models’ work experiences. They may prefer a career if they have seen a valued role model working in that particular career and the benefits of that career for their role model. Teachers also have a great influence on students’ attitudes and interest. Youth have cited the importance of meeting scientists and learning from them to spark their interest in STEM careers. The powerful role of adult high expectations cannot be overstated.

Youth work experience – The kinds of jobs, internships, and related experiences youth have already had and have access to in the future influence their career exploration process. Success in work-related learning experiences, tasks and activities can support positive career development. However, work experiences can be hard to find for youth in some communities where employment opportunities are scarce.

Educational experience – Helping youth learn about and prepare for selecting, applying to, financing, and succeeding in college or other post-high school educational opportunities supports their career exploration process.

Society – The community where youth live can provide or limit career development opportunities for youth. Minority youth in particular often face additional structural barriers, like labor market discrimination, racism, and lower teacher expectations making meaningful career exploration challenging.

Supporting Youth Career Exploration

There are a variety of ways we can support a young person’s career exploration process. Caring adults can encourage youth vocational identity development by helping youth learn about all their possible selves, including their current self and future hoped-for self. Adults can help youth expand their idea of who that hoped-for self can be, helping youth see themselves and role models like them at college and in wide array of careers. Adults can be role models (and connect youth with more role models) who have high expectations for youth. Adults can spark the development of career interests by helping youth find work-related activities they find satisfaction in and enjoy. They can support youth developing self-efficacy in work-related skills, including life skills. For example, to foster interest in STEM careers, demonstrate the value of STEM learning and help youth build STEM skills.

Program Development

There are many elements that youth participants and research suggests are valuable parts of career explorations programs.

Learning Relationships

The relationship between the educator and the youth is central to the learning experience. Program leaders who youth see as approachable role models and treat youth as individuals and as young adults rather than children have great impact. Adult program leaders who have high expectations for youth and who believe that providing youth with positive learning experiences and support can affect their future life path. Mentors can support youth developing possible career selves, learning about possible goals, and developing strengths that help youth respond in a balanced way to challenges. Youth value speaking with university staff, faculty, and students about their work and careers. Program leaders can also deepen and extend program impact by partnering with parents and families to support youth career exploration.

Learning Environment

Successful programs are ones where youth feel safe and have fun. Youth value learning in labs and other real-world work contexts.

Learning Experiences

Hands-on activities are the most frequently-cited component of successful learning experiences. Opportunities to develop work and life skills (and for youth to demonstrate successfully using these skills and receive constructive feedback) support both career exploration and positive youth development.

Complementary to this, youth value frequent opportunities for discussion and debate. The opportunity to reflect upon their experiences both in the current learning experience and how it relates to their future deepens the impact of the experience. Social and cooperative learning, where youth talk with each other, explain ideas, and share opinions is also powerful.

Participants’ value interesting content and the information they learn, including information about topics (such as STEM) and about careers and how to set and reach career-related goals. Activities that help youth reflect on, explore, and test answers to questions like “What do I want to do when I grow up? How will I get there? Am I able and ready to do what I need to do to get there?” support successful career exploration.

Ultimately, we want to provide positive, fun and hopeful program activities that provide youth with opportunities to explore and learn about themselves and a multitude of career pathways.
8 Growth Mindset: https://www.mindsetworks.com/science/
10 Program Evaluation responses from past Career Explorations participants (2015-2016)