

How much is too much?

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Howdy. I hope everyone enjoyed the Cattlemen's Conference and made it back home safely. In preparation for some of our upcoming events, I found some inspiration to express my view on a very important subject affecting many of our 4-H youth today. What is it? Well, I would like to pose a question to you. How many projects can our 4-H youth be actively involved in before it becomes too much? I would remind you that this is strictly my opinion, and would hope that you truly think about what I have to say before you say to yourself that Brian doesn't know what he is talking about.

First of all, parents and agents, turn back the pages in time to when you were involved in 4-H. Now compare that picture with the image of 4-H today. Does it look a little different? While we still strive to accomplish the same goals that have always been the foundation of the 4-H program, there are many new ways and new projects that have made themselves available through the 4-H program of today. Livestock and other agriculture-based projects make up a lower percentage of total 4-H club work today compared to 20 years ago. Is this saying livestock and agriculture-based program participation is declining? No, 4-H is penetrating the urban areas and involving more youth in 4-H programs designed for an urban setting thus the percentage of agriculture programs decreases as more of these programs are made available to kids. I am pleased to say that feedback from folks across the state gives the impression our livestock program is experiencing an increase in project participation. As we offer new programs in other areas of 4-H, we also are developing new programs within the livestock program itself. Meat goats are taking the state by storm. I venture to say that if parents today had been told their kids would be exhibiting goats, they would have laughed you out of North Carolina. Nonetheless, we see this as the fastest growing livestock program across the state as it has become a very attractive project to 4-Hers of all ages. The Skillathon event is continuing to grow in participation. Heifer projects seem to be increasing. We also have livestock and veterinary science presentations, beef char-grill, pork cookery, project records, and many other projects that give youth more opportunities to participate. We, as adults, often encourage kids to be involved in numerous projects in order to increase their degree of "well-roundedness" (is that a word?) so they are better candidates for scholarships and other awards. Therefore, I feel we really need to step back and evaluate what we are expecting from our kids and ask the kids what they expect from themselves.

I truly believe that youth will rise to the expectations that we set forth for them. However, sometimes I think we can set too many expectations and try to get our kids involved in too much at one time. Please, do not misunderstand what I am saying. I was a 4-Her that was involved in everything from my traditional livestock program (showing and judging) to leadership activities to Foods and Nutrition plus football, basketball, FFA, band, and I even tried to learn how to tickle the ivory keys. Nope, I never learned how to effectively play the piano, but I learned how to march and play a trombone without running in to someone or hitting somebody in the back of the head with the trombone slide. Quite an accomplishment in itself, I thought. My point is...I was

involved in just about everything that I could be a part of; HOWEVER, a decision always had to be made and a price always had to be paid. If you would allow me, I would like to use myself as a case study.

My father was my extension agent and could have easily had me doing everything 4-H offered. Still, he knew that there was more to life than just 4-H. When I was six years old, I showed my first two lambs, started a Registered Rambouillet ewe flock, and had about a dozen rabbits. This was quite a responsibility for a six year old, right? Well, Dad and I decided that the rabbits had to go because I enjoyed my sheep project more (Decision #1). Over the next few years my sheep project and I grew until I was nine or ten. I decided to test my culinary skills and potential as a concert pianist along with becoming a member of the Wool & Mohair and Range judging teams. Ok, the boat was filling rapidly but everything stayed afloat because we had the projects scattered throughout the year. Over the next few years I served as an officer in my Junior 4-H club and then I turned 12. Yes, I had reached the age of nobility and looked forward to doubling my weight by putting on all of those football pads. My boat had started to take on water at this point. Although my culinary skills were progressing nicely, I had not been making much of an effort to become a concert pianist. I had to let both of these projects go in order to pursue the road to the NFL and later in the year, basketball and the NBA (Decision #2). Two years later I began high school and the quest for straight A's, a scholarship, and acceptance to Texas A&M (there was no other choice). I added the marching band and FFA to my list of activities. I held office in my Senior 4-H Club and FFA Chapter throughout high school. My boat was full, but manageable. I certainly did not have time to get in to any trouble. After my freshman year, I had to let the marching band go so I could continue to take a Vocational Agriculture class (Decision #3). After my sophomore year, I had to let the VoAg classes go because my academics would send me to college (Decision #4). My junior year, I served as a member of the Texas 4-H Council and Vice-President of my District 4-H club. My senior year, I had to give up my district and state level leadership involvements to maintain my focus on academics (Decision #5). All of this time, I maintained my involvement in my sheep projects, wool & mohair judging, range judging, football, and basketball. I tried showing a steer one year, but found out I could not put forth the time to be successful. I showed hogs one year and angora goats for two years. While I enjoyed these projects and were successful at them, I discovered that my sheep projects had suffered because of the time I contributed to these other projects. Moral of the story...when I found my boat was getting too full to maintain success at all of my activities, a decision had to be made and a price had to be paid.

Do you have to be successful at a project to stay involved? No, but what I want folks to understand is success is the result of a lot of time, effort, and dedication. In order to devote the time, effort, and dedication necessary for success, you have to enjoy what you are doing and desire to do your best. Notice, I placed time first on the list. Time is a precious commodity these days, and kids do not have much of it to spare. If you find that time is running short, you might consider making one of those decisions about something else that you are involved in. Regardless, of how hard we try to be involved in every 4-H, FFA, school, etc. project possible, sometimes activities and schedules are going to conflict. At that point, we as parents, leaders, agents, and specialists have to guide our youth through the decision making process. I showed you some of my major decisions

that I had to make, but there were numerous smaller ones that were made as well. My parents were always there to help guide me. Sometimes, I wanted to try to do everything, but they made me choose because they wanted me to have the time necessary to improve at a particular project and not accept mediocrity. The 4-H club motto is “To Make the Best BETTER”. How can we make ourselves better if we can not devote the time necessary to do so to a particular activity? Forget 4-H for a second, and think about you as a parent and your job as a father or mother, as an employee and your responsibilities at work, as an employer and your responsibilities to your employees, as a kid and your responsibility to yourself to succeed in the classroom as well as extra-curricular activities. If we do not force ourselves to make a decision and pay a small price for that decision, I am afraid that we will find ourselves paying a larger price in the long run. Folks, I would love to hunt and fish regularly, play golf, raise and show livestock all over the nation, train dogs, and a lot of other things. However, I have a responsibility to devote my time and effort to my family, my church, and doing my job by serving each of you. Occasionally, I have the opportunity to do some of those other activities. However, I accept the fact that to be at my best, I must decide how my time is spent. I encourage you as parents to make sure that your child is not accepting mediocrity in order to become well-rounded. Instead, allow and sometimes force your kids to make a decision in order to make them better. I want to encourage youth to be involved in as many activities as they can handle, but not to the extent they become consumed by all of their activities. In my opinion, the ability to make decisions that will make you successful in different situations is what makes someone a well-rounded individual. Don't gripe and complain about having to decide, or look back and say you should have done something different. Instead, make a decision, live and learn, and enjoy being successful.