

OUTCOMES & IMPACT QUARTERLY – SPRING 2025

INTRODUCTION

From youth leadership to innovative career preparation, this edition highlights the lasting impact of USU Extension programs across Utah. We're diving into 51 years of the High School Range Camp, exploring the power of equine-assisted literacy, and taking flight with 4-H drone aviation camps. Plus, we'll examine the vital role of farmers markets in local economies and celebrate efforts to support Latino youth leadership. Read on to explore how these programs are shaping the future of our communities.

Sincerely,

Kenneth L. White

Senior Vice President of Statewide Enterprise
USU Extension and Statewide Campuses



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AN EVALUATION OF THE HORSE POWERED READING® RETREAT PROGRAM

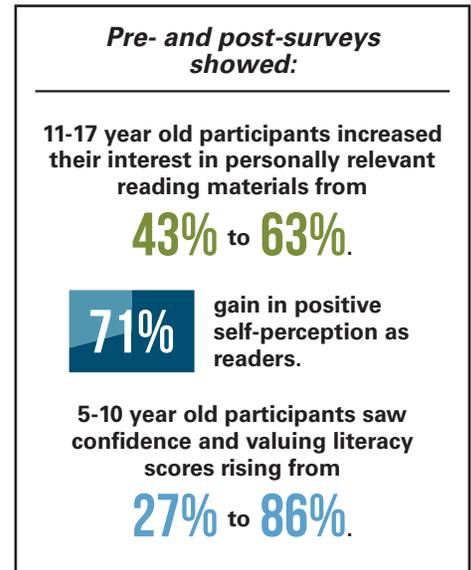
Troy D. Allan, Allison Garlick, Makenna Pahlke

The Horse Powered Reading® (HPR) retreat program addresses a critical problem faced by youth in Utah: the intersection of low literacy skills and poor mental health. Only 48% of third graders in Utah read at grade level, and high rates of suicide and self-harm among young people highlight urgent social-emotional challenges. Research links limited literacy—such as weak vocabulary and phonological knowledge—to negative emotions like anger, sadness, anxiety, and social isolation. This underscores the need for innovative approaches that support literacy development and emotional well-being.



In response, Utah State University Extension piloted the HPR retreat in October 2024, targeting children ages 5 to 17 from rural counties (Piute, Sevier, and Wayne). The program integrated equine-assisted learning with literacy activities designed to build reading skills and social-emotional competencies. During the retreat, program participants partnered with horses and engaged in interactive literacy exercises designed to enhance vocabulary, motivation, and narrative skills while helping participants manage anxiety and build self-confidence in their reading abilities. Two age groups attended separate sessions so content could be tailored according to age. Outcomes suggest that HPR effectively promotes self-efficacy and positive attitudes toward reading by providing a supportive, engaging environment.

While still in its pilot phase, the HPR program shows promise as an innovative approach to bridging literacy and mental health gaps. Future efforts will focus on refining the curriculum, expanding reach, and assessing long-term impacts on academic performance and emotional well-being, particularly in rural communities.



— EVALUATING 51 YEARS OF THE HIGH SCHOOL RANGE CAMP —

Cory Farnsworth

Survey results showed that participants:

- ★ Valued the experience.
- 📖 Are pursuing college degrees and careers in natural resource fields influenced by the camp.
- 🏠 Had their choice of university influence by the camp.
- 🔥 Secured internships and employment in range-related roles with agencies like the USDA, BLM, and Forest Service.
- 🏆 Performed better in FFA competitions after the camp.

The Utah High School Range Camp was established in 1973 by Utah State University Extension and the Utah Society for Range Management to address challenges related to rangeland management in Utah, where nearly 45 million acres of grazing land are primarily managed by state and federal agencies. At that time, many ranchers were slow to adopt sustainable rangeland practices, leading to conflicts over land use and degradation of soil, plant health, and biodiversity. This situation threatened rural economies dependent on livestock grazing and increased risks such as catastrophic wildfires. To mitigate these issues, the Range Camp was created to educate youth about the value of rangelands, proper management techniques, and career opportunities in natural resources, thereby fostering a new generation equipped to manage these lands responsibly.

The camp targets high school students interested in natural resources or range-related fields, offering immersive, hands-on experiences across diverse ecosystems in Utah. Participants camp for four to five days in July and engage with experts including university professors, agency land managers, and ranchers, learning about poisonous plants, noxious weeds, wildlife, monitoring techniques, and restoration practices. The program also emphasizes networking and professional development, preparing youth for higher education and careers in rangeland management.

The impact of the Range Camp has been significant and lasting. Overall, the Range Camp effectively promotes sustainable rangeland management by equipping youth with knowledge, skills, and professional connections, contributing positively to both individual career trajectories and broader public land stewardship in Utah.

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY'S ROLE IN LATINO YOUTH LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Celina G. Wille, Lendel Narine

Camp results:

89%

reported improved communication skills.

92%

reported better teamwork.

74%

reported gains across eight core leadership areas.

TOPICS INCLUDED:

- College preparedness
- Mental health
- Professionalism
- Social media
- Public speaking
- Teamwork

Utah's Latino youth population is rapidly growing, mirroring national demographic shifts. As of 2017, Latino youth made up 17% of K–12 students in the state, and projections indicate they will significantly shape Utah's future workforce, politics, and economy. However, these youth often face barriers to educational access and leadership opportunities. Research shows that intentional youth leadership development programs foster essential life skills, such as communication, goal-setting, and civic engagement, but opportunities tailored to Latino students remain limited.

In response, USU, in partnership with USU Extension and Latinos in Action (LIA), launched leadership boot camps beginning in 2018. These multi-day, campus-based events were designed to help Latino middle and high school students develop leadership skills, explore career paths, and gain exposure to higher education. Each year, the camps evolved in size, structure, and curriculum based on feedback and evaluation. USU leveraged its campus resources, including mentors, faculty, and cultural centers, to provide meaningful, culturally relevant experiences.

These camps foster not only leadership but also a sense of identity and community. Participants report higher self-confidence, academic motivation, and interest in civic engagement—qualities that benefit Utah's social and economic fabric. Moving forward, USU Extension is expanding this model into rural communities, reinforcing USU's commitment to statewide youth development for everyone.

PREPARING YOUTH FOR CAREERS IN DRONE AVIATION: EVALUATING WASHINGTON COUNTY 4-H DRONE CAMPS

Paul A. Hill, Aubree L. Miller, Katarina J. Aikens

As drone technology becomes increasingly integrated into industries such as agriculture, logistics, data collection, and others, the demand for skilled drone operators continues to grow. However, youth in rural areas often lack access to hands-on training and career exploration in this high-tech field.

To address this gap, Washington County 4-H implemented a series of Drone Camps for 4th–8th grade youth during the 2024 summer. The camps focused on foundational skills in drone aviation, including drone anatomy, FAA regulations, flight safety, and piloting techniques. Through experiential learning activities, such as building drones, practicing takeoff and landing, and navigating no-fly zones, participants gained practical knowledge in a supportive and engaging environment. The program also emphasized career exploration by introducing real-world drone applications and industry standards.

To build on this momentum, Washington County 4-H launched six drone clubs with 18 active youth. These clubs engage in state-level competitions and explore drone applications ranging from agriculture to emergency response. By providing continued opportunities to apply and expand drone skills, the program is helping youth prepare for careers in a rapidly growing industry.

Pre- and post-camp evaluations showed:

93%

reported improved knowledge of drone piloting and technology.

80%

had greater awareness of career opportunities in drone and aviation fields.

- *Understanding of FAA regulations and drone anatomy increased substantially.*
- *Piloting confidence grew across all participants.*
- *An intent to practice safe flying*
- *A desire to earn more about drone technology.*



THE STATEWIDE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS OF UTAH FARMERS MARKETS

Jaclyn Pace, Roslynn Brain McCann, Bryn Watkins, Steven Price

Utah’s farmers markets respond to pressing statewide challenges: economic instability for small farms, food deserts, and a need for community connection. With over 800,000 Utahns living in areas with limited access to affordable, nutritious food, and 11% experiencing food insecurity in 2023, improving food access is vital. At the same time, local farmers and small businesses struggle to remain profitable in a competitive marketplace. While farmers markets offer a promising solution, Utah has lacked the consistent data and support needed to maximize their reach and effectiveness.

In response to this, the Utah Farmers Market Network (UFMN) created and supported by USU Extension, launched a 3-year statewide data collection project across six key markets. Via an innovative “dot survey” method in 2024, they used stickers on posters to collect data on customer behavior, vendor earnings, and market engagement. This effort aims to provide farmers market managers, vendors, and stakeholders with the tools and information needed to expand operations, improve marketing, and secure financial and community support. The program also supports vendor training, pricing strategies, and outreach to underserved communities.

Findings show that farmers markets are vital social and economic engines. UFMN’s efforts provide a model for sustaining and scaling Utah’s farmers markets, positioning them as essential to the state’s economic resilience, food security, and community health.

800,000+
Utahns live in
food deserts.

11%

experienced
food insecurity
in 2023.

Farmers markets showed:

20% of customers’
grocery
spending
shifted to local markets
(\$26–\$50 per visit).

Nutrition assistance
programs redeemed
>\$369,000

Vendors earned
\$2,000–\$18,000
per season.

- Boosted community well-being and tourism
- Farmland preservation
- Reduced healthcare costs
- Stronger communities

\$3.5–\$7 M
spent across six
markets.

