



JOURNAL OF THE NACAA

ISSN 2158-9459

VOLUME 19, ISSUE 1 – JUNE, 2026

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Expanding Livestock Education Opportunities for Urban Youth Through the Bastian Agricultural Center 4-H Program

Abstract

Increasing urbanization has created barriers for youth interested in participating in traditional livestock projects due to limited access to land, facilities, and financial resources required to raise animals. In 2022, three youth approached the Utah State University Bastian Agricultural Center after zoning regulations prohibited them from housing livestock at their residences. The youth partnered with the USU Bastian Agricultural Center to temporarily house the animals, supporting three youth raising six livestock. That effort expanded into a structured youth livestock program beginning in 2023. Participation increased from 23 youth raising 25 animals in 2023 to 64 youth raising 86 animals in 2025, with an additional poultry project introduced in fall 2025. Evaluation results indicated high satisfaction, strong youth development outcomes, and nearly 100% participant retention. By removing the requirement for youth to pay upfront livestock and feed costs, the program reduces financial barriers to participation while a cost-recovery auction model supports long-term program sustainability.

Introduction

Livestock projects have historically served as a cornerstone of youth agricultural education programs within Cooperative Extension systems across the United States. Participation in livestock projects provides experiential learning opportunities that support technical agricultural knowledge while fostering important life skills such as responsibility, leadership, and time management (Bialeschki et al., 2007; Diem et al., 2011; Harder, Lamm, & Strong, 2013; Rusk & Machtmes, 2003).

These experiences align with the Positive Youth Development framework, which emphasizes supportive learning environments, mentorship, and opportunities for youth to develop competence through hands-on activities (Bialeschki et al., 2007; Lerner et al., 2015). Within 4-H programming, project-based learning allows youth to develop mastery through sustained engagement in agricultural projects.

However, youth living in urban and suburban environments often lack access to land and facilities necessary to raise livestock. Financial barriers can also limit youth participation, as the cost of purchasing animals and feed can be prohibitive for many families (Harder et al., 2013). Salt Lake County represents one of the fastest-growing urban regions in Utah, creating increasing challenges for youth interested in traditional livestock projects.

In 2022, three youth approached the Utah State University Bastian Agricultural Center with a challenge: zoning regulations had forced them to remove livestock from their homes, leaving them without a place to complete their projects. Extension faculty, 4-H program coordinators, and FFA advisors partnered with the youth to temporarily house the animals, allowing them to continue their projects. This effort supported three youth raising six animals and ultimately served as the catalyst for what would become the Bastian Agricultural Center Youth Livestock Program.

Building on the success of this initial effort, the program was formally expanded in 2023 to provide structured livestock education opportunities for youth lacking access to

livestock facilities. The purpose of this article is to describe the development and growth of the Bastian Agricultural Center Youth Livestock Program and examine its outcomes as a model for expanding livestock education opportunities for urban youth.

Methods

The Bastian Agricultural Center Youth Livestock Program originated in 2022 when three youth raising six livestock animals sought assistance from the Utah State University Bastian Agricultural Center after zoning regulations prevented them from housing livestock at their residences. Extension faculty, 4-H program coordinators, and FFA advisors partnered with the youth to temporarily house the animals, allowing them to continue their projects.

Following the success of this initial effort, the program was expanded in 2023 to provide structured livestock project experiences for youth throughout Salt Lake County. Participants raise livestock within a shared barn environment while participating in both 4-H and FFA agricultural education programs.

Youth participants assume responsibility for feeding, caring for, and training livestock throughout the project period while receiving instruction from extension faculty, extension program coordinators, and experienced volunteer mentors. A cooperative management structure allows youth and families to share barn responsibilities.

Program accessibility is supported through partnerships with donors and sponsors who cover the upfront costs of livestock animals and feed. Removing these financial barriers allows youth from urban communities who might otherwise be unable to afford participation to engage in livestock projects. This model allows youth to participate without requiring significant upfront financial investment while maintaining program sustainability through auction-based cost recovery.

The program culminates with youth exhibiting their animals at the Salt Lake County Junior Livestock Show. Youth compete in showmanship and market classes before participating in the junior livestock auction. Support from community buyers and program sponsors helps ensure successful animal sales. A portion of auction proceeds is returned to the program to recover initial animal and feed costs, allowing the program to remain financially sustainable.

Program evaluation was conducted using youth and parent post-program surveys administered at the conclusion of each project cycle to assess satisfaction, youth development outcomes, and perceived program impact.

Results

Participation increased substantially during the first three years of structured program implementation (**Figure 1**). Youth participants represented multiple communities throughout Salt Lake County including West Jordan, South Jordan, Riverton, Bluffdale, Taylorsville, Murray, Sandy, Salt Lake City, and West Valley City.

Survey results indicated strong youth development outcomes. Youth respondents reported an average satisfaction rating of 9.8 on a 10-point scale, with all respondents indicating that they developed new life skills including responsibility, communication, time management, and resilience.

Parents reported observing improvements in youth responsibility, leadership, problem-solving ability, and work ethic. Nearly all parents indicated they would recommend the program to other families.

Retention rates were also exceptionally high, with nearly all youth participants returning for additional project years.

Beyond youth development outcomes, the program also contributes to community food systems. At the Salt Lake County Junior Livestock Auction, generous community buyers purchase animals exhibited by youth participants and often choose to donate the processed meat to local food banks. In 2024, these donations resulted in approximately 23,725 pounds of meat being provided to the Utah Food Bank. In 2025, buyers again supported the program, resulting in approximately 22,716 pounds donated to the Utah Food Bank and an additional 2,603 pounds donated through the Miracle of Agriculture Foundation.

Year	Species Offered	Youth Participants	Animals Raised
2022	Lambs/Goats	3	6
2023	Lambs, Goats	23	25
2024	Lambs, Goats, Pigs	40	60
2025	Lambs, Goats, Pigs	64	86
2025 (Fall)	Turkeys	6	58

Figure 1. Growth in youth participation in the Bastian Agricultural Center Youth Livestock Program (2022–2025).

Discussion

The Bastian Agricultural Center Youth Livestock Program demonstrates that livestock education opportunities can be successfully delivered in urban environments when appropriate infrastructure and mentorship are available. Rapid participation growth

suggests strong demand for livestock education opportunities among youth without access to traditional agricultural facilities.

The program's origin also illustrates how Extension systems can respond to emerging barriers affecting youth participation. Local zoning restrictions eliminated the ability for several youth to house livestock at their homes, effectively removing their opportunity to complete livestock projects. By leveraging existing infrastructure at the Bastian Agricultural Center, Utah State University Extension was able to provide an alternative solution that expanded access to livestock education for youth across the county.

The donor-supported cost model further strengthens program accessibility by eliminating upfront participation costs. The cost recovery structure through livestock auction proceeds allows the program to remain financially sustainable while continuing to support new participants each year.

Implications for Extension Educators

This program demonstrates how Extension systems can expand access to livestock education through shared facilities, community partnerships, and financial accessibility models. By leveraging donor support and cost recovery mechanisms, Extension programs can remove financial barriers while maintaining long-term sustainability. The shared facility model presented in this program provides a practical framework that other Extension systems may adopt to expand livestock education opportunities for youth in increasingly urban communities.

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