

# impact

University of Idaho Extension programs that are making a difference in Idaho.

## 4-H STEM AmeriCorps expands hands-on STEM education across Idaho

### AT A GLANCE

The 4-H STEM AmeriCorps program expands access to hands-on science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) education, preparing Idaho youth for future careers and life success.

### The Situation

Today's youth face serious challenges. The Centers for Disease Control reports that 52% feel they're failing at life goals and Newsweek found 53% experience loneliness. In Idaho, many live in rural areas with limited access to quality after-school programs. Meanwhile, nearly 10 million U.S. jobs remain unfilled, with employers prioritizing real-world skills over academic credentials. Without targeted support, Idaho's youth risk being unprepared for tomorrow's workforce.

Half of Idaho's counties are socioeconomically vulnerable and 35 of 44 are rural. Many youths lack access to hands-on STEM education during critical after-school hours, increasing their risk of missed opportunities and risky behaviors.

4-H programs offer a proven solution through positive youth development and STEM learning. Yet many counties lack the volunteers and staff to deliver them. Teaching STEM can be intimidating for volunteers, despite strong interest from youth. Trained adult leadership is limited, especially in rural areas.

### Our Response

To bridge the gap, University of Idaho Extension 4-H Youth Development has partnered with AmeriCorps to



4-H AmeriCorps member teaching youth about the color wheel as part of a STEAM lesson in Canyon County.

place trained AmeriCorps members in communities statewide. These members expand STEM access and increase the number of caring adults providing hands-on learning where it's needed most.

In 2019, 4-H received an AmeriCorps State and National Grant to meet the growing need for youth STEM education. AmeriCorps members, called 4-H STEM youth instructors, were placed in Extension offices and with youth partners across Idaho to expand access. While the program is complex to manage, its impact has proven invaluable.

The 4-H STEM Corps program was developed and expanded over the last six years, supported by strategic funding and outreach. Starting with Extension, the program has grown to include youth organization part-

nerships through providing excellent support and prioritizing trust with partners and members. By attending district meetings and youth development conferences, we built “lantern relationships” — guiding connections that help communities see their role in shaping youth futures.

The program’s success stems from strong internal support, cost-efficiency and a statewide network that boosts delivery and outreach. It brings 4-H to youth who might otherwise miss out on positive adult relationships and opportunities to explore, take risks and grow.

At the heart of the program is the 4-H Thriving Model, which supports youth development through experiential learning. It builds life skills and predicts outcomes like academic motivation, social competence, meaningful relationships and responsibility. AmeriCorps members receive training in the Thriving Model, STEM lesson planning and basic pedagogy.

A major boost came from the American Rescue Plan Act funding in 2021, which helped meet match requirements and reduced hosting costs. This allowed expansion into new communities. In 2024, the program reached its member cap and developed a waiting list of host sites.

The program has drawn a diverse group of returning members, college students and community volunteers, all committed to youth and STEM. Since launch, it has grown from 13 to 32 host sites and placed 207 members across Idaho, showing strong partnerships and a scalable model.

## Program Outcomes

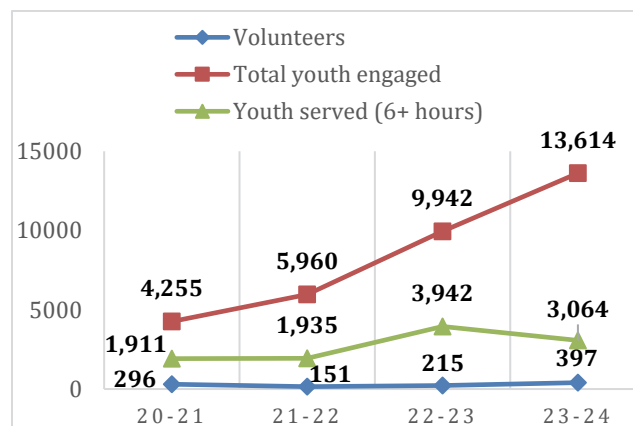
Each year, the program has increased engagement. In 2020, AmeriCorps members reached 4,255 youth; by 2023-24, that number grew to 13,614. Volunteer recruitment rose 34% during this period.

To expand STEM access, members increased hands-on activities at host sites, with a focus on increasing youths' life and career skills. This helped youth build empathy, responsibility and community. Members assess this by using the 4-H Thriving Model Assessment tool. Youth also reported a stronger sense of belonging, supported by the Thrive Model. In 2023-24, 34% of 250 youth showed a measurable increase in SEL skills.

AmeriCorps members expanded access to STEM and after-school programming in underserved communities. In Lemhi County, a member helped launch the county's first summer STEM program, while in Moscow, member support enabled the Adventure Club to serve 50 additional youth. Among students who participated in at least six hours of hands-on STEM activities, 34% reported increased life skills. To sustain impact, the program emphasizes continued AmeriCorps member education and encourages site supervisors to provide training and mentorship, key to maintaining quality and long-term success.

The program has shown measurable improvements in meeting community needs, especially in STEM access. Its cost-effective model supports scalable growth, with the capacity to expand to more members and host sites.

Chart 1. AmeriCorps program impact



## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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