Review of Literature

Several state-based competency models have been proposed for 4-H (Boyd, 2003; Cooper & Graham, 2001; Gregg & Irani, 2004), but only one national model exists. According to Astroth, Garza and Taylor (2004), “The 4-H Professional Research and Knowledge Base (4-hprk) has been seen as the foundation for competency guidelines in the 4-H youth development profession since it was created in 1985” (p. 34). In 2004, a National Professional Development Task Force convened to formally revise the 4-hprk. The revision process included a review of the existing model, examination of internal and external youth development research, and interviews with State 4-H program leaders, administrators, content experts, and internal and external youth development professionals (Stone & Rennekamp, 2004). A draft document was then shared with stakeholders and released via 4-H related Web sites in an effort to solicit additional input. The resulting document was renamed the 4-H Professional Research, Knowledge, and Competencies (4-H PRKC) model.

The 4-H Professional Research, Knowledge and Competency model consists of six domains representing subject matter areas that “focus on what matters most when working with young people” (4-H PRKC, 2004, ¶3) including: (a) youth development, (b) youth program development, (c) volunteerism, (d) partnerships, (e) organizational systems, and (f) equity, access and opportunity. Each domain lists the competencies necessary for effectiveness within that subject.

Past studies of competencies have emphasized the volunteerism domain. Hange, Seevers, and VanLeeuwen (2002) compared 4-H agents’ attitudes and perceived competence in relation to nine volunteer management competencies listed in the original
4-hprk. Although agents’ perceived the competencies to be important, they were less confident in their abilities to perform the competencies. Hange, Seevers and VanLeeuwen concluded that volunteer management training was necessary to decrease the gap between competence and importance. The findings of their study confirmed previous work by King and Safrit (1998) and Collins (2001) which also documented similar disparities related to volunteer management competencies.

Although the volunteerism domain of the 4-H PRKC has been well-examined, research into the other five domains has not achieved the same level of popularity. Yet a study by Harder and Dooley (2006) found that most of the competencies perceived to be important by 4-H agents resided within the organizational systems domain of the 4-H PRKC, not volunteerism. Organizational systems competencies include time management, conflict management and communication (Stone & Rennekamp, 2004). Harder and Dooley’s results are supported by Seevers, Baca and VanLeeuwen’s (2005) identification of conflict management and people skills as highly requested areas for training. A 4-H agent is expected to be competent in all six domains, not just volunteerism. A needs assessment should be conducted to increase the understanding of priority training needs within the organizational systems domain.