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Program Reporting in Cooperative Extension

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Abstract. This article explores the challenges of reporting outcomes of the Extension educational programs at land-grant universities and presents a model highlighting the focus and expectations of reporting in Cooperative Extension. This model provides a rationale for recognizing the relationship between program planning, evaluation, reporting, and employee-performance appraisal and their implications for organizational growth and learning.

INTRODUCTION

Program reporting is standard procedure in Cooperative Extension, but Extension professionals and administrators often face challenges in reporting program outcomes (Archer et al., 2007). Increased program accountability required by the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) of 1993 has elevated this challenge (Hoffman & Grabowski, 2004). The GPRA requires agencies to engage in performance management tasks such as setting goals, measuring results, and reporting progress. The reporting requirements of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Institute of Food and Agriculture (USDA-NIFA) mandate the review of all programs receiving federal funding. Even after the most productive and impactful program implementation, securing further funding and support may be more difficult without accurate reporting (Bradley et al., 2011).

Extension's engagement in reporting outcomes has many advantages: improved programming, the increased value of educational services, reaching underserved audiences, and helping secure public funding (Rennekamp & Arnold, 2009). Cooperative Extension has a multi-faceted organizational structure; its educational programs are funded through multiple sources, and it serves a wide range of clientele of various ages and from diverse locales (Ghimire & Martin, 2011). Therefore, Extension educators with the tools needed to effectively articulate the impact of their varied programs can more effectively build capacity and foster long-term growth.

County, state, and federal stakeholders hold Extension accountable for the dollars that are invested in programming and require Extension professionals to articulate accomplishments using measurable data. A study conducted by the University of Florida (Diaz et al., 2019) found that Extension educators face challenges in program reporting. While the preparation and training of Extension educators involve abstract discussions regarding program reporting, a practical understanding is often dependent upon rigorous application and years of experience. According to Bradly et al. (2011), the perception among Extension professionals is often that reporting is only necessary after the program ends. Throughout the program delivery process, they fail to intentionally harvest the data that can usefully drive future programmatic efforts. One potential solution to the myriad of concerns facing professionals working in the world of Extension is the use of a clear, well-organized reporting model (Figure 1). This model should address the relationships between program planning, evaluation, service delivery, reporting, and appraising employee performance. This model should serve as a framework to assist Cooperative Extension as it develops a reporting system that can be used to create shareable, concrete, and actionable information for our stakeholders.

PROGRAM REPORTING MODEL

This article's author offers a model that provides an ideal reporting framework for Extension. This model represents the author's years of experience in program planning, implementation, evaluation, and outcome reporting both in Cooperative Extension and in an international Extension setting. It provides guidelines for developing a reporting system that corresponds with needs assessments, program development, evaluation of educational activities, performance appraisal of Extension educators, and organizational learning for the growth and development of Extension as an institution.

Figure 1 depicts the suggested reporting model and its features. The boxes on the left are the foci and those on the right are expectations associated with each focus. Each expectation leads to the following focus, so the full pathway for reporting and development is clear.

DESCRIPTION OF THE MODEL AND INTERRELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COMPONENTS

PRIORITY

As an Extension organization, our priority is to serve the citizens of the state. The community, county, state, and federal stakeholders expect that our programs are based on the needs of the people; this is also a core value of Extension in each land-grant institution. To fulfill this expectation, we must develop needs-based programs that solve problems and meet individual and community needs.

PLAN OF WORK

Based on the needs collected from the statewide needs-assessment process (e.g., listening sessions, stakeholder analysis, surveys), the subsequent focus is to develop a Plan of Work (POW). The POW includes critical state
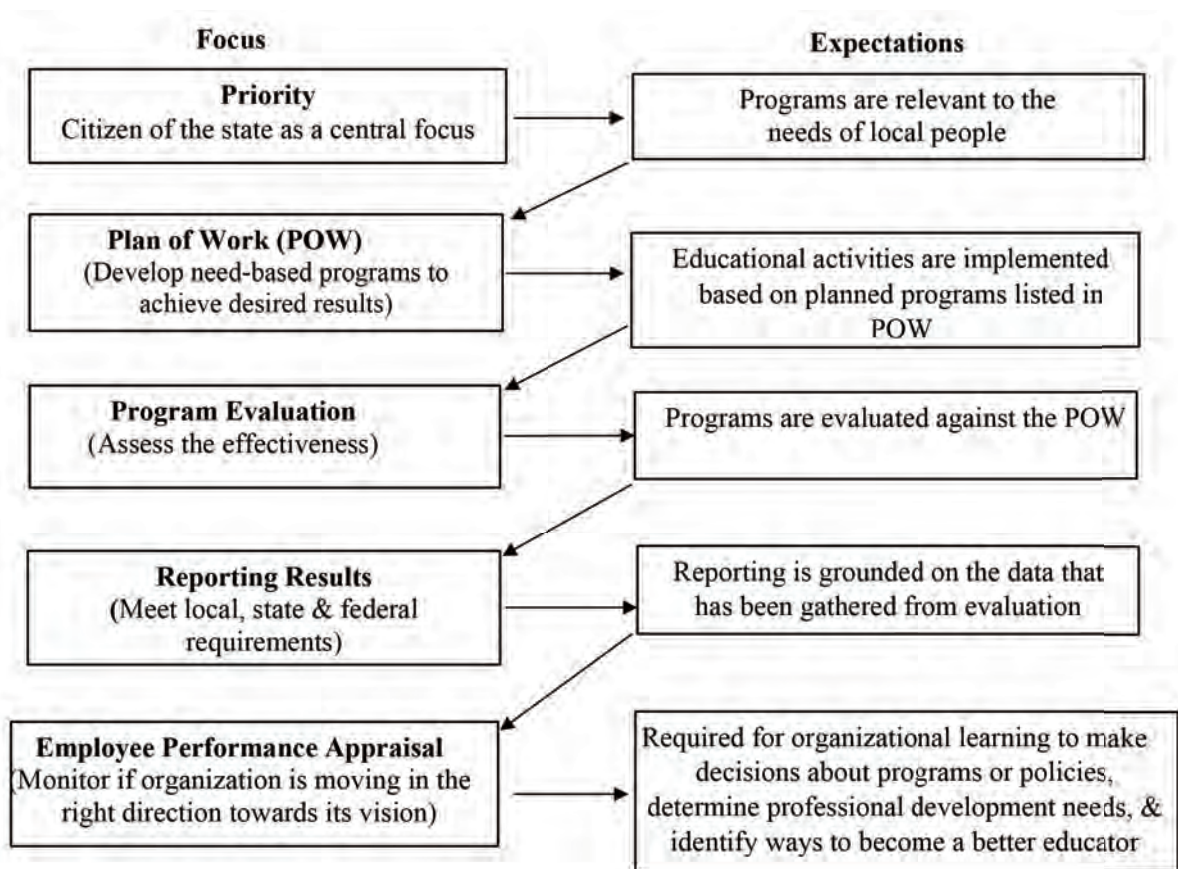

Figure 1. Program reporting model for Cooperative Extension.

issues, planned programs, intended outcomes, indicators of success or failure, evaluation methods, implementation timelines, required manpower, budgets necessary to accomplish the tasks, and other specifics of the program. In Extension, the POW is developed every five years and submitted to USDA-NIFA by each land-grant university. The expectation is that educational programs implemented by Extension educators are directly tailored to the POW. In the author's experience, many Extension professionals do not recognize the existence of the POW nor its importance.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

As programs are implemented following the planned programs listed in the POW, our focus is to measure the outcomes using various evaluation tools (e.g., surveys, interviews, observations, case studies, and research findings). The expectation is that each educational activity is evaluated against the intended outcomes listed in the POW.

REPORTING RESULTS

Once we have collected data on the program outcomes, our focus is to report the results that will meet the expectations of stakeholders at each level; the goal is that reporting is grounded in the data collected from program evaluation.

EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL

With the outcome data, Cooperative Extension conducts performance appraisals of its employees. Generally, Extension utilizes performance appraisals to examine how employees are fulfilling their job responsibilities. We often overlook the use of the performance appraisal to collect feedback from our employees on how effectively we are moving toward achieving the organizational vision. The performance evaluation is a powerful tool to determine which programs remain relevant and responsive to the needs of people, what emerging issues need to be addressed in the following years, which policies need to be modified or added, and what kinds of professional development programs are most necessary for Extension educators to improve professionally.

AUTHOR'S SUGGESTIONS FOR MODEL USE

The program development/evaluation specialists and administrators can use the above program reporting model to strengthen the Extension system following these suggestions:

- Involve Extension educators in the statewide needs-assessment process.

- Form program teams and name each one based on the thematic issue identified from the statewide needs assessment to highlight the issue each time the team's name is used.

- Ensure that each educator is assigned to one or more program teams based on their area(s) of expertise and educational background. An educator and a specialist co-lead each program team.

- Organize a conference to develop the POW for each program team/thematic issue; include planned programs (as per the USDA-NIFA guidelines).

- Advise educators to conduct a stakeholder analysis with the advisory committee/communities at the local level to design and implement deliverables (the educational activities) as guided by POW.

- Mandate that educators conduct end-of-session and follow-up program evaluations that specifically address the intended outcomes, indicators, and methods listed in POW.

- Build educators' evaluation capacity through training and one-on-one consultations tailored to their programming needs.

- Modify and design the Extension reporting system based on the POW (or changes in the POW) every five years.

- Train educators to correctly enter program outcome data in the reporting system. Use educators' experiences (collected during the performance appraisal) to determine what information is required for institutional learning and growth. This feedback could include: what is working and what is not working; which programs should be discontinued or merged with other programs; what challenges are emerging; which new programs could benefit audiences; what new audiences are in need of service; which program

requires further collaboration for effective implementation; whether volunteers are needed to facilitate the program; which policies needs to be removed, added, or modified; and whether it is necessary to change the delivery of a program or the approach/presentation to the audience.

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