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Tamara Pellien

Rutgers University, pellien@rce.rutgers.edu

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Building 4-H Program Capacity and Sustainability Through Collaborative Fee-Based Programs

Abstract

Shrinking budgets and increased demands for services and programs are the norm for today's Extension professional. The tasks of procuring grants, developing fund raisers, and pursuing donors require a large investment of time and can lead to mission drift in the pursuit of funding. Implementing a collaborative fee-based program initiative can fund current and new programs, increase program capacity, and create program sustainability.

Tamara Pellien

County 4-H Agent
Rutgers Cooperative
Extension of Ocean
County
Toms River, New
Jersey
pellien@rce.rutgers.edu
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Introduction

For decades, Extension has offered free programs thanks to financial support from grants and public funding, but these traditional funding streams are no longer as strong or consistent as they once were (West, Drake, & Londo, 2009). Demand for new programs is high, but funding the design and implementation of programs to address emerging initiatives is challenging when public funding streams are shrinking (Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service, 2007). Establishing alternative funding streams is imperative (Hughes & Ledbetter, 2009; Jackson & Johnson, 1999), and fee-based program structures can support programs, increase capacity, and create program sustainability. To implement a fee-based structure for your programming, consider using the following steps:

- Shift paradigms.
- Establish high-quality collaborative programs that have costs.
- Evaluate and communicate impact.
- Build sustainability through staff training.

Fee-based programming leverages the financial resources of local youth-serving organizations to meet the needs of the community and to develop innovative programs.

Engaging in a Paradigm Shift

Fee-based programming requires a paradigm shift in how we think about what we do and how our efforts affect our communities. Fee-based programming builds on the idea that Extension is a content expert and that our programs are valuable to the communities and people we serve. As professionals, we need to accept that it is imperative and right to place a monetary value on the programs we offer. At the same time, it must be stressed that fee-based programs cannot replace public funding and should not jeopardize your current status as a public institution.

Establishing Quality Programs That Have Costs

The step of establishing a high-quality collaborative fee-based program involves endeavors that may differ slightly to significantly from what has been customary for you. You will need to listen to collaborators, establish a monetary value for programming, introduce an idea that others might not be ready to accept, and develop and secure collaboration-based proposals and agreements.

Use of Listening Skills

Identify potential collaborators having missions aligned with the goals of Extension, and ask to meet with relevant individuals to discuss new ideas for collaborating. YMCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs, after-school programs, and summer camps are great places to start for 4-H professionals. During the initial meeting, leave *your* ideas and *your* direction at the door, and listen carefully to your new partner to understand the kinds of programs the partner wants and what the partner is hoping to accomplish. Assuming that you are not drifting from your mission, as Jackson and Johnson (1999) warn, addressing your partner's needs within your program is part of the collaborative spirit you want to build.

Value of Your Program

The value of your program is determined by program cost and program worth. The goal is to keep program cost as low as possible while maximizing program worth. Cost calculations should focus on three areas: personnel, supply, and indirect costs. For personnel costs, salary is calculated using a 4:1 ratio (4 paid hours for every 1 hour of face-to-face teaching), which accounts for time spent preparing activities, attending meetings/training, and teaching. Highly qualified educators are expensive, but they will implement a higher quality program. Supply costs are self-explanatory, but keep in mind that high supply costs mean high program cost, which could decrease program demand. Indirect costs cover training, administration, equipment investment, and development of new ideas. Indirect costs should be at least 25% of the total program cost.

Understanding the worth of programs requires research. If you provide what a collaborator needs at a reasonable cost, the collaborator will value your program over other options, but organizations will not collaborate with you if you simply duplicate existing programs, cost too much, or have no interesting opportunities. Use the following questions to guide your research:

- Who is currently providing programs in the community?
- What are the fees for similar programs?
- What is the financial health of your target community?
- Who would be interested in this program (participants, parents, volunteers), and are they likely to attend?

A New Idea

The transition from free to fee-based models can be awkward to manage. Charging for a program today that was free yesterday is next to impossible, so the emphasis should be on developing new programming with demonstrable costs (supplies, curricula, trainings, staffing, etc.).

Partners who are accustomed to receiving free programs may be resistant. It is important to listen to their concerns, explain the costs and budget restrictions, and consider alternative solutions, such as gradual escalations of cost.

Proposal and Agreement

Asking for money can be an uncomfortable experience for both the person asking and the person being asked, so it is important to develop an open, trusting relationship with your collaborators. Collaborators often push for a firm idea about costs early on, but you should hold off responding until you have a proposal that highlights the entirety of the program you are offering. Proposals should include information about the following aspects of a program: scope of program, times and dates, goals, content, responsibilities, impact, and cost. Allow collaborator input, and then sign a memorandum of agreement delineating the agreed on terms.

Implementing, Evaluating, and Reporting

With fee-based programs, it is important to provide feedback to your partners. Upon completion of a program, conduct an evaluation, and prepare a report for your partner that highlights the impacts. This report should be tailored to meet your needs and the needs of your partner (Stup, 2003) so that your partner can use the report when reporting back to funders, a board, or superiors.

Achieving Sustainability Through Educator Training

Keeping the method for achieving sustainability simple is a key to the success of fee-based programming. To build sustainability, train educators to independently pursue and develop new collaborators and program opportunities. This simple approach is mutually beneficial as it increases the outreach capacity of 4-H and preserves educators' employment statuses.

Impact

A fee-based structure developed by using the steps described here was successfully implemented in

four county 4-H programs. The programs developed ranged in topic from expressive arts to outdoor adventure to robotics and allowed the hiring of many part-time educators. Over 1,500 youth participated in 6–18 hr of 4-H programming that was completely self-funded and required no direct support from county, university, state, or federal funding streams. In addition, the operating costs, including the purchase of supplies and equipment for the 4-H office, were met.

Conclusion

Traditional funding streams are increasingly insufficient to support the demand for a broad range of Extension programming. Fee-based initiatives create an important funding stream to support programs, build capacity, and ensure sustainability.

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