

2-1-2013

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Recommended Citation

Harder, A., Moore, A., Mazurkewicz, M., & Bengé, M. (2013). Problems Impacting Extension Program Quality at the County Level: Results from an Analysis of County Program Reviews Conducted in Florida. *The Journal of Extension*, 51(1), Article 31. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol51/iss1/31>

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Problems Impacting Extension Program Quality at the County Level: Results from an Analysis of County Program Reviews Conducted in Florida

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Abstract: Needs assessments are an important tool for informing organizational development efforts in Extension. The purpose of the study reported here was to identify problems faced by county units within UF/IFAS Extension during county program reviews. The findings were drawn from the reports created after five county units experienced program reviews in 2011. External problems with the potential to affect program quality were more numerous than internal problems. The persistent and widespread nature—beyond the counties studied—of the identified problems should create a sense of urgency within the Extension system to develop innovative and collaborative solutions.

Introduction/Need for Research

County program reviews of UF/IFAS Extension are conducted annually (Harder, Lamm, & Strong, 2009). The reviews are used "to assess program quality, facilitate program improvement, foster cooperation among Extension's various units, and assist in achieving the best use of institutional resources" (Jacob, Israel, & Summerhill, 1998, para. 1). The county program reviews provide opportunities for improvement of both Extension programming and county operations. McCulloch and Cronshaw (2008) described self-evaluation as a "highly desirable, if not essential, precursor for informed organizational development or change" (p. 89). The county program reviews provide objective and triangulated data that can be used to improve Extension programming. They allow for identification of internal assets and potential solutions to cited problems. This can better equip individual counties to address their own needs, foster collaboration and involvement by Extension personnel, and allow county agents to achieve ownership of improvement efforts (Rhydderch et al., 2005).

Thorough analysis of the results of the county program reviews is required to maximize the benefits of that process. In 2009, Harder, Lamm, and Strong assessed eight Florida counties based on the 2008 county review reports to evaluate strengths, problems, opportunities, and problems that appeared across the state. Harder et al. identified a marketing deficit, loss of human capital, technological barriers, the economic downturn, and increasing urbanization as some of the problems faced by county units. The purpose of the study reported here was to identify the problems faced by county units reviewed in 2011.

Methods

The study reported here was conducted using a basic qualitative research design (Merriam, 1998). The final reports ($N = 5$) from the 2011 county program reviews were used as the primary sources of data. Five counties geographically dispersed across the state's five Extension districts participated in the 2011 review process. The counties being reviewed were purposively selected by the District Extension Directors and Extension Deans and ranged in size from four to 30 faculty and staff members. The communities being served included some of the smallest (~27,000 residents) and some of the largest counties (~1.3 million residents). The smallest counties typically provided programs in the traditional areas of 4-H, agriculture, horticulture, and family and consumer science, while progressively larger counties included natural resources, nutrition, and sea grant programs. The diversity of selected counties was considered desirable for the study because "using several sites, cases, situations, especially those that maximize diversity in the phenomenon of interest . . . will allow the results to be applied by readers to a greater range of other situations" (Merriam, 1998, p. 212).

The procedures recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to increase trustworthiness (the qualitative equivalent of validity) were followed prior to data analysis. Each County Extension Director was presented with the opportunity to review the accuracy of the information included in the final report for his/her county unit in a process known as "member checking." Lincoln and Guba (1985) described member checking as "the most crucial technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314). The use of multiple investigators on a review team enabled the data to be triangulated, which increases the trustworthiness of a study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Researchers should report personal bias when discussing the trustworthiness of a qualitative study (Merriam, 1998). The lead researcher for the study was formerly a 4-H agent and is currently a state Extension specialist and an academic faculty member. The lead researcher has been the director for the county program reviews since 2007. The co-researchers were graduate research assistants in Extension education, one of whom has been employed as a 4-H agent since 2008.

The constant comparative method of data analysis was used to sort the data from the final reports into emergent themes or categories (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Merriam (1998) described the constant comparative method as the comparison of "one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences" (p. 18). Only the sections of the reports describing problems faced by county units were analyzed so that the researchers could identify where potential needs existed.

Findings

The following problems were identified from the five county program review reports. For clarity, emergent themes have been italicized for emphasis. Coding was used when including direct quotes from the reports.

Impact of budget Cuts

The primary problem identified was the *impact of budget cuts*. The magnitude of budget cuts ranged considerably between counties, but reductions forced all counties to adapt their personnel and/or programming. Report 3 stated, "The reduced budget negatively impacts [our] county's ability to maintain a full staff, deliver the current number of programs, and fund basic office necessities" (R3). In several counties the number of programs was reduced, and certain programs were cut altogether. Also, in one case the agents began charging program fees from participants, which "is a concern because the economy has devastated the [county's] communities, and many residents are unable to pay the fees" (R5).

Other effects of budget reductions were felt in the personnel sector. One county saw a 35% reduction in staff over the preceding 5 years, and loss of staff coming "at a time with increasing demands on Extension services and educational programs" (R2). Others addressed budget cuts to personnel with furloughs, which caused frustration among agents who "continue to meet the demands of their position by working on those days" (R5).

Socio-Economic Factors

Large economic disparities between the "very wealthy and extremely disadvantaged" (R3) were cited, leading to the identification of *socio-economic factors* as a problem to program delivery and participation. Two counties (R2, R3) described the impacts of poverty, which was also considered "extensive" in Report 1. County 5 stated that "food security is a primary concern" and that potential Extension clientele "must have food before other issues have their attention" (R5). Lack of public transportation and the prohibitive cost of gas were also cited as "limiting participation in programs" and that poverty-related illiteracy "requires alternative means of programming and marketing" (R5). All together, the socio-economics of clientele "creates a problem for outreach, communications, and program implementation," (R2) which can cause certain groups to be underserved.

Poor Facilities

Another problem reported by counties was the effect of *poor facilities* on limiting client visitation. The concerns revolved around the condition of Extension buildings, office layout, and signage. Report 5 cited a lack of climate-controlled offices due to "worn out" air conditioners and pests (mice) as deterrents to client visits (R5). Two counties (R1, R3) described the effect of poor layout on restricting

visitation and Extension events. "The office layout is not ideal for walk-in clients," described Report 1, further explaining that "the office secretary is stationed in a back office and there is no one to greet walk-in clients." Report 5 also stated that "the floor plan is not conducive to the flow of events" was a factor limiting program effectiveness (R5). Signage was cited by two counties as reducing client participation. Visibility of signs from major roads/highways was one concern (R2), while another county questioned the inadequacy of signage to "inform the public of program opportunities" (R1).

Technological Exclusion

The *technological exclusion* of some Extension clientele was another problem. Four counties cited a transition towards Web-based communications and marketing as a restriction towards reaching the segment of each county that lacked access to the Internet (R1, R2, R4, R5). County 1 reported "Rural connectivity to the Internet was mentioned as a barrier for some clientele" (R1), while County 5 stated "A segment of the population in [this] county may not have access to the Internet" (R5). The move towards electronic newsletters was specifically cited in two reports (R2, R4). "A reduction in printing monies has made reaching the more traditional audiences (who do not use e-mail) challenging," stated Report 4. All counties reported similar barriers to participation, indicating a possible trend in UF/IFAS Extension.

Technological Limitations

Similarly, *technological limitations* that reduce productivity were observed. Outdated computers (R2) and lack of wireless Internet in county offices (R4) were cited as problems, as were security procedures like firewalls that "prevent Extension personnel from utilizing electronic resources" to improve programming and productivity (R3). One report described issues of poor integration between county-based and University of Florida computer systems that "make work tasks awkward and cumbersome at times" (R2). Requests for additional training and support in the use of technologies were suggested as a means of improving technology use and maximizing the effectiveness of existing equipment/software within Extension (R4). Social media and Smartphone applications were specifically cited (R4).

Marketing Deficit

A *marketing deficit* and a lack of awareness of Extension programming and functions in the counties examined was observed. Report 1 estimated that the county's Extension unit was unknown by "at least half" of citizens (R1), while Report 2 suggested "the majority of citizens are not aware of county Extension programs" (R2). Insufficient or ineffective marketing efforts were cited by three counties, as stakeholders reported ignorance of Extension (R1, R2, R3) and misunderstandings about Extension's role in serving constituents (R1). The cause of this marketing deficit was less clearly identified by the county reports, with one stating "The cause for the lack of awareness is unclear, as the county has active relationships with media outlets and receives clientele referrals from several different entities in the county" (R1). Still, improved marketing of Extension to county residents was a problem identified in this study.

Overstretched Agents and Insufficient Support Staff

Finally, the county reports all identified a problem of *overstretched agents and insufficient support staff*, caused by the previously discussed problem (and impact) of budget cuts. Cuts in personnel left agents responsible for filling roles that had previously been the responsibility of a dedicated agent. Report 2 described the "dual role of county administrative responsibilities" and the corresponding increase of work for each position, "especially during the absence of an Urban Horticulture Agent" (R2). Another report described the time contribution made by other agents to cover a 4-H agent vacancy (R1). The concern with these dual roles was that individual positions were underserved, agents were overworked, and "the momentum [might] be difficult to sustain without added support" (R5). Additionally, a lack of clerical and secretarial support caused agents to "[take] time away from their professional responsibilities" to handle clerical tasks (R5). Report 4 suggested that to maintain the "high level of service" provided by agents despite limited resources (program assistants, secretaries, etc.) that "certain programs may need to [be] cut out in order to preserve the long-term viability of the faculty member in the position (i.e., prevent faculty burn-out and attrition)" (R4).

Discussion

The problems cited in the 2011 county program review reports echoed the findings from the 2008 reports (Harder et al., 2009), suggesting they may have relevance beyond the study's limited sample. The most commonly occurring problems in both studies were outside the scope of control of the county unit, such as the struggling economy and changing stakeholder demographics. This seems to suggest that the reviewed counties, generally, are doing the best with what they have when it comes to delivering programs. Additional help is needed from the Federal, state, and county administrative levels to provide much-needed resources. Some of these resources are monetary, while others can be addressed through the provision of accessible (e.g., asynchronous, online) professional development to build competencies in the areas of technology use and marketing. Brokered communication between the many parties that administer Extension is needed to resolve problems with ill-defined boundaries, such as eliminating IT barriers, renovating facilities, and protecting Extension's human capital.

The Merriam-Webster (2012) dictionary defines a problem as "a question raised for inquiry, consideration, or solution" (Definition of

Problem). While some recommendations for addressing the problems faced by some of Florida's counties have been offered, the persistence and prevalence of the identified problems over time and across county units suggests there are no simple solutions. Successfully addressing complex problems will require collaborative thinking from multiple members of the Extension system. Conferences, professional associations, eXtension, and Commentary discussion in the *Journal of Extension* all provide suitable forums for innovative thinking about the best ways to continue Extension's strong traditional of excellence in the face of contemporary problems. The authors would like to encourage readers to become engaged in such conversations.

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