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Strategies for Ensuring High-Impact Outreach and Scholarship

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Abstract: How do you become an effective Extension professional—produce scholarly work, provide strong educational programs for clientele, and show impact and outcomes? It requires proactive planning so that valuable impact can be measured and shared with appropriate stakeholders. Learn how the Department of 4-H Youth Development, Rutgers Cooperative Extension uses a programming model that makes scholarship a natural part of everyday work. Expand and enhance your Extension scholarship while highlighting and strengthening local program efforts.

Pressures from funding sources (grants, foundations, and various levels of government) and the land-grant system require that educators and Extension professionals document and report the critical impact that programs have on our clientele. Budget woes have caused our programs to be heavily scrutinized for impact. Are we making a difference? How can we prove it? Are the programs based on sound research, measurable objectives, and solid evaluation techniques?

To an educator, the major challenge of participating in the world of scholarship is finding the time to do what seems to be two different jobs—conducting programs to meet the needs of local clientele and carrying out scholarly activities. With a little planning and some tools to help along the way, scholarship can become a natural part of everyday youth work. The old adage, "if you fail to plan, you will plan to fail" is appropriate in Extension outreach programming. Beginning with the end in mind is critical to delivering solid programming resulting in strong impact. Culp (2009) makes the case for this by reiterating the point that documenting programmatic value through scholarship not only strengthens communities, but also justifies the value of Extension programs.

The question then is posed—how do we do that? Through proactive, effective planning, implementation, evaluation, and reporting, you can expand and enhance scholarship activities that complement local program efforts. The impact of our programs on the community can be measured through program evaluation and teaching effectiveness while impact on the profession can occur by reporting these successful program outcomes.

Much has been written about the need for evaluation, how to evaluate, and the debate of scholarship versus practitioner. This article is about the basics—how to conduct a successful program and prove it! Many program development models including the logic model all use these basic steps. Rutgers Cooperative Extension, Department of 4-H Youth Development uses the programming cycle depicted at

<http://www.nj4h.rutgers.edu/about/NJ_4-H_Extension_Programming_Model.pdf>.

This model has morphed through the years to become more detailed and sophisticated, but is similar to the model outlined by Brereton (1972). Diem (2003), a former RCE faculty member, expounded on the evaluation portion of this model.

Identify Issue and Document Needs

What is the problem that needs to be addressed? Who is the audience/clientele? Methods that are most often used to address these questions are: needs assessments, surveys, literature or statistical searches, focus groups, clientele requests, advisory group input, and local, state, and national initiatives.

Develop Outcome Objectives

What changes will be seen in the audience as a result of the program? Objectives should be specific, measurable outcomes. Document impact on people and communities, changes in attitudes, behaviors, and practices. Document the effectiveness of teaching efforts to demonstrate that people have gained knowledge and skills.

Identify and Obtain Resources

What resources will be needed? These include grants, monetary donations, in-kind support, volunteer time, as well as partners/collaborators. Conducting a cost analysis will help determine real costs and benefits.

Plan the Program

What kind of program will be delivered to facilitate change? Develop measurable process objectives to accomplish your outcomes (see above). Delivery methods may include an educational event, experiential activities, websites, webinars, workshops, and demonstrations. This would include developing programming materials, including curriculum. Consider pilot testing new programs or curricula.

Plan Evaluation

How will you know if the program is a success? Identify indicators for each outcome. How will you document program impact? Prepare evaluations, including teaching effectiveness forms, pre-post tests/post-post tests, end-of-program evaluations, longitudinal research, participant and parent surveys, etc. It is essential to check with your university Institutional Review Board (IRB) to determine need for review, exemption, or other status.

Implement Program and Evaluation Plan

Finally, the reason for all of the planning: Deliver the Program! As you do this, be sure to include time to collect appropriate evaluation data, statistical information, and other necessary information. Again, with proper planning, there will be time to gather pertinent information for later use.

Analyze Data, and Document Impact

Did the program meet the process and outcome objectives? So many times the raw data gets filed or is not properly analyzed. Be sure to follow through to get accurate and correct statistical analysis, including qualitative and quantitative reports. Without this step, much is missed in being able to report results and justify the program.

Report Results

Use this data to report the success of the program in many ways—impact and accomplish reports, ES-237 report, grant reports, performance appraisals, promotion and tenure documents, clientele or stakeholder reports, newsletters, factsheets, etc.

Demonstrate Impact on Profession

Don't be hesitant to share success! Report results, best practices, lesson learned, creative methods, and new programs through professional presentations, refereed journal articles, journal articles, newsletters, webinars, websites, Programs of Distinction, and other methods. Ask for feedback from others who may have duplicated your program. Look at it as a diversified portfolio that includes multiple ways to represent creativity, products, and outcomes. Adams, Harrell, Maddy, Weigel (2005) provide a starting list of what could be in your scholarship portfolio.

Attain Recognition

It's not bragging, it's a way to promote your program's success. Look for professional and local awards (4-H, Extension, other), Programs of Distinction, appointment to boards, etc.

The Results . . .

Scholarship and demonstrating impact can provide a way to strengthen your own local Extension work, as well as the youth development profession as a whole. It can provide you a way to expand and enhance your own professional competencies. Smith (2004) summarizes this concept: "Delivering a successful, targeted program in a county can help hundreds or possibly thousands of local clientele. Now it is our responsibility to take that program and make it national by sharing our success with countless others."

Now you can now plan effective programs that yield high-impact results both in the community and in the profession. You can easily integrate these models into the demands of working with youth development audiences. And most important, you can proactively plan for sustainability through providing critical stakeholders with appropriate documentation of impact.

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