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Advancing the Public Value Movement: Sustaining Extension During Tough Times

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Abstract: Extension must more fully and adeptly embrace the public value movement to be sustainable as a publicly funded organization, or our demise as an organization will continue. The public value steps outlined here and piloted with several Extension systems and national work groups can be informative for others interested in capturing and sharing the public value of Extension work. Overall, the Extension public value banner needs to be held high as we struggle to change the perception of our work by addressing this as a "movement" in our organizational development and not a "response" to the economic environment.

With the changing U.S. economy, Extension systems are focusing more fully on accountability for investment of public funds in educational programming. Public perceptions of Extension program impacts matter now more than ever to decision-makers as public funding thins. Extension has struggled to find ways to help decision-makers understand the public value of Extension work (McGrath, Conway, & Johnson, 2007). The prevention work conducted by Extension has been seen as especially troublesome in determining public value (DeBord, 2005).

Some Extension systems have responded to this need for telling the public value story by conducting workshops for staff (Kalambokidis, 2004), hiring private companies to measure economic and social impact of their work to share with legislators (Ohio State University Extension, 2010), and asking clients to articulate the public value of programs they've participated in (Bartholomay, 2007; Franz, 2009). Extension field staff report that as a result of increased pressure for accountability for program impact, a major use of their program evaluation data is "persuasive use" to help others value their work (Baughman, 2010). In this effort to maintain or gain public support for programs, Extension systems need to intentionally plan, implement, and evaluate an Extension public value movement.

The Importance of Public Value

Organizational sustainability for Extension now relies on translating the value of what we do to a wider audience than we have in the past. The power base for public funding now rests on more urban and younger audiences. Additional push for public accountability for organizations can be seen in three key indicators: 1) exponential growth in the American Evaluation Association membership, 2) evaluation measures put forth by the Office of Management and Budget for federal programs, and 3) the evidence-based movement for education programs (American Evaluation Association, 2010).

Defining Public Value

In 2001, Laura Kalambokidis, an applied economist with the University of Minnesota Extension, initiated the public value movement in Extension (Kalambokidis, 2007). She uses principles of public sector economics to help Extension staff determine and share the public value of their work (2004). She defines public value as "The value of a program to those who do not directly benefit from the program" (2007, pg. 12). Others in Extension have suggested this is best achieved using a transformative education approach to Extension work (Franz & Townson, 2008). This contrasts with the private gain or personal value program participants directly gain from Extension education such as new knowledge gain or behavior change.

Six Steps to Embracing Public Value in Extension

Kalambokidis suggests steps to identify public value in an Extension program through public value workshops with Extension employees (2004). As the public value movement in Extension matures, organization-wide steps in addition to staff professional development are needed. In response, I have piloted the steps below with several national Extension programs and Extension systems at several institutions.

Understand the Differences between Public and Private Value

Many Extension staff and administrators have difficulty envisioning how Extension work translates to public value for non-program participants. Kalambokidis (2004) suggests four public values for Extension: 1) narrowing an information gap, 2) fairness or justice of resource distributions, 3) reducing costs or increasing benefits for stakeholders, and 4) public good. The goal becomes not just changing client behavior, but showing this changed behavior leads to outcomes that benefit the general public by generating public value (Kalambokidis, 2007). For those familiar with the logic model, this means moving the focus from short- and medium-term outcomes of learning and behavior change to long-term outcomes resulting in economic, environmental, or social condition changes (University of Wisconsin-Extension, 2010).

Create the Case and Urgency for Public Value

Employees and stakeholders need to realize that Extension is an organization in decline due to reduced public funding. This has created an environment of accountability and evidence-driven work that requires a change in Extension culture. To create a public value-based culture, Extension systems have asked decision-makers to speak to paid and volunteer staff about the need to explicate public value. Some Extension systems have also tried to catalyze change by sharing examples of Extension losses by decision-makers due to their lack of public value understanding of Extension work. A variety of staff development workshops on the topic have also been held (Kalambokidis, 2004). A common response to this first step to helping staff embrace public value comes from requiring public value stories as part of performance reviews (also known as "impact statements" or "success stories").

Move from Embracing Private or Personal Value to Embracing Public Value

For some Extension systems it has been difficult to move from measuring educational outputs (i.e., number of participants, number of workshops) to measuring private value through client learning and behavior changes. Moving to articulating the public value of Extension work can be even more difficult. Extension administrators, staff, and stakeholders need to extend or reframe the way they describe Extension outcomes. Table 1 shows several examples of reframing learning and behavior change as public value.

Table 1.
Comparing Extension's Private and Public Value

Private or Personal Value	Public Value
Youth and adults develop leadership skills	Increasing civic participation
Homeowner conducts tests for septic tank leaks	Decreasing water pollution or drinking water contamination
Youth and adults increase their intake of fruits and vegetables	Decreasing health care costs
ServeSafe certification by restaurant workers	Reducing food-borne illness and related health care costs
Youth serve on teen court	Reduce juvenile recidivism and court costs
Reduced use of pesticides	Improved water quality

Embracing the public value of Extension education means repositioning the way we describe our work from what clients learn and do to what economic, environmental, and social conditions change as a results of client changes. Some Extension systems, such as Maine, Minnesota, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Vermont, and Virginia, have more quickly embraced this repositioning of their work by testing the descriptions of their work with the unengaged public to determine what terminology is most compelling or other public value actions.

List and Prioritize Extension Public Values

Once staff embrace the need to explicate their work in public value terms, the public values that will guide the organization's efforts must be determined. The whole organization or subsets of the organization need to brainstorm the public values of current or future work and then prioritize those to most fully support. In some Extension programs, paid staff have participated in sessions to work together in large and small groups to describe and make the case for embracing particular public values. The whole group then ranks those public values most fitting to their work and their internal and external climate. Most groups find that about 10 public values can be focused on over several years.

Develop Public Value Story Telling Templates

In this step to advancing the public value movement, Extension workers create templates for organization-wide use to share public value success. These templates include a title describing the public value gained from the educational effort, information on the relevance of the issue being addressed (i.e., why the work is needed), Extension's educational response to the issue, including partners involved, the private and public value results of Extension's response, and contact information. For an example of a statewide public value template see Boyer et al., (2009). Involving economists, program evaluators, and clients in developing templates is critical to best measuring and describing the public value.

Develop Public Value Stories

Most Extension staff are familiar with this stage of the Extension story-telling process in their work, often

requiring impact statements or success stories. The public value focus takes this process one step further by focusing the story not just on client gains, but also on how those gains benefit the public. During this step, involvement of communications staff is important to best present the story for public consumption. Graphics may be added, portfolios of stories created, and tests of the materials conducted with the public. Many institutions provide specific instructions for Extension staff on this process (Virginia Cooperative Extension, 2010).

Describing and Sharing Public Value Becomes an Extension Norm

Extension systems where describing and sharing public value has become the norm realize several cultural changes. Human and fiscal resources become allocated to programs that result in public value. Performance reviews include a focus on public value. Extension scholarship more fully describes and documents value. Organizational annual reports include public value. Support for private value programs are not supported by public funds. Finally, the research and evidence base for public value programs increases (Morse, 2009).

Lessons Learned from Public Value Movement Work

Extension systems embracing the public value movement have found the work isn't easy but it is possible and effective. The following lessons may help ease the path for those engaging in this movement.

- Be proactive with public value stories rather than waiting until decision-makers cut Extension funding or programs.
- Start the movement with early adopters, and nurture the midadopters. Don't waste time on resisters.
- Build urgency with staff by using real stories about public lack of understanding or misunderstanding of Extension work (i.e., decision-makers who have cut Extension funding or programs).
- Provide a wide variety of professional development opportunities for Extension staff to enhance their public value thinking, skills, and story development.
- Secure public value champions in the organization at all levels to help catalyze change.
- Use many examples of public value of Extension work for staff deeply steeped in the private value of their work as tangible incentives to change their thinking and practice.
- Don't underestimate the ability of clientele to determine, measure, and share public value of Extension programs (Franz, 2009).
- Encourage researchers to conduct research and share results connecting the private value of Extension work with public economic, environmental, and social condition changes.

- Create a strong statistical base for the relevance section of public value stories to make them more convincing and to make it easier to measure actual change due to Extension programs.
- Bridge field and administrative visions and actions around public value efforts through middle managers in the organization.
- Determine which programs should be supported solely by public funds and solely by private fund by determining the public value of each program.
- Develop organization-wide templates with staff to provide a tangible and safe environment for changing thinking about program value, and help staff improve program development, implementation, and evaluation to more fully address public value.
- Use public value work as a way to integrate Extension campus and field perspectives in holistically addressing public value.
- Involve economists, program evaluators, communications staff, and stakeholders in developing public value stories to more deeply and authentically tell the story.
- Urge Extension administrators to enhance or catalyze public value throughout the organization.

Conclusion

Extension must more fully and adeptly embrace the public value movement to be sustainable as a publicly funded organization, or our demise as an organization will continue. The public value steps outlined here and piloted with several Extension systems and national work groups can be informative for others interested in capturing and sharing the public value of Extension work. Overall, the Extension public value banner needs to be held high as we struggle to change the perception of our work by addressing this as a "movement" in our organizational development and not a "response" to the economic environment.

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