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The Future of Extension Programming Post-Pandemic: The Need for Diverse Approaches

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Abstract. The Covid-19 pandemic has been highly disruptive to Extension programming. Online programming has emerged as one of the primary approaches for maintaining engagement with the communities and populations Extension serves. Some have even suggested that it might become the default programming method, even after it is safe to return to in-person programming. In this commentary, I discuss some of the current limitations and challenges inherent in online-only programming—ones that are often overlooked by Extension personnel. Further, I discuss key factors that Extension personnel should take into account when considering online programming for any future professional efforts.

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted all aspects of daily life, including Extension programming. The virus forced Extension personnel to adapt much of their programming for online delivery in order to maintain service to their communities. There have been many successful innovations: Fawcett et al. (2020) and Bamka et al. (2020) are just two of many examples of how Extension professionals have risen to this challenge. In the aftermath, some have suggested the possibility of online-only programming becoming the “new normal” even after it is safe to return to in-person gatherings. While online Extension programming is certainly here to stay, it is unlikely that it will replace all in-person programming or become the default delivery method.

There is no question that expanded online programming offers various benefits and opportunities for Extension. It allows more flexibility for individuals to access beneficial training and knowledge. Furthermore, it can reduce barriers to participation—such as travel time or scheduling conflicts—and allow instructors to reach a larger audience. It can also allow access to more specialized programming that might not be available locally. Finally, online programming can allow Extension personnel to “do more with less”—a prominent topic of discussion within Extension even before the pandemic (Bowen-Ellzey, 2014; Jacobsen & Kar, 2013). Ultimately, online programming is another useful tool for Extension personnel; when used correctly, it represents an opportunity to increase the reach, impact, and efficacy of Extension programming.

UNDEREMPHASIZED CHALLENGES OF ONLINE-ONLY PROGRAMMING

Those who claim that online programming can completely supplant in-person programming are mistaken; there are compelling reasons why in-person programming will remain a prominent tool for Extension personnel. Challenges to all-online programming come from many different directions, and we should be aware of these challenges before committing to online-only programming as the primary focus of our professional efforts.

One shortcoming of online-only programming is infrastructure limitations: namely, the access to broadband internet required for online conferencing applications. While broadband internet availability has expanded greatly,

there are still many Americans without access to reliable broadband internet. An estimated \$80 billion in investment is necessary to provide broadband to all Americans, with \$40 billion required for remote and rural areas (Federal Communications Commission, 2017). While there are ongoing discussions about the expansion of broadband access, there is currently no definitive plan or roadmap to fully fund and accomplish this endeavor. This lack of a plan indicates that internet access will remain a hindrance to online Extension programming.

Furthermore, delivering online programming is not nearly as simple as it is sometimes portrayed. It requires intentional planning and effort, and it can be more challenging than simply presenting in-person curricula in front of a camera or in a Zoom conference. Interacting with program participants, facilitating dialogues, and assessing program outcomes are all conducted differently in online programming. These actions are not especially difficult for online programming and do not require a skillset that is uncommon within Extension. However, they do represent a different set of considerations and planning. Even the most experienced and capable Extension personnel faced a steep learning curve.

As an example of these challenges, consider Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). When this programming first became available, it was hailed as the great equalizer of education. Those wishing to learn, from anywhere in the world, would be able to access this type of education. By recording these lectures, a single professor could reach thousands of students in a recurring fashion. However, MOOCs did not live up to the hype of these initial expectations. Lack of real-time interaction with instructors, as well as limited connection with other class attendees, meant dropout rates were high—greater than 85% for most courses (Onah et al., 2014). While some MOOCs are effective, their failure to reach their potential remains a warning that effective online programming is not nearly as simple as reproducing in-person teaching online.

Some benefits of in-person programming can be difficult to recreate comparably within online settings. Group activities and projects, which can reinforce the information delivered by instructors, can be difficult online (Chandra, 2020). Further, spontaneous interactions between program participants—like conversations during breaks and other downtimes—can lead to enhanced learning outcomes (Tang, 1993). It is difficult to create online environments that lead to these spontaneous interactions, which potentially limits the overall impact of online-only programming.

I encounter these challenges to online programming when I teach Human Centered Design (HCD), a methodology for deeply understanding people for whom you are solving problems, most often by generating, designing, creating, and testing potential solutions to expected or real problems. Many of the ideation techniques (i.e. those used to generate solutions to previously-identified problems) used for this methodology are more effective when done collaboratively in small teams, and this group effort produces a higher number and quality of concepts than does an individual working alone (Brewer, 2017). There are significant challenges to creating an online environment where these teams can seamlessly complete ideation actions. I have found this to be especially challenging when applied during first-time collaborations, though teams with previous collaboration experience also face challenges. While I have not given up on teaching HCD online, I have realized that I need to continue to innovate and improve how I teach this content in these settings if I want to maximize learning outcomes for those I teach.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR EXTENSION?

So, how do we approach post-pandemic programming within Extension? As always, there is no single solution or one-size-fits-all approach. As Extension personnel, we must continue to be mindful of the constituents we serve and the programming formats best suited for their needs. This will likely vary based on our specific audiences and continue to evolve over time, so this engagement must be continuous. We must be willing to adapt this programming based on the feedback we receive.

Extension personnel must also continue to work to improve online programming. While many of us have gained skills in this area since the pandemic began, there is more that we can do to improve our ability to deliver online programming. This improvement entails intentional focus on multiple aspects of online programming, including but not limited to content delivery, audience engagement, group collaboration, and interaction between instructors and participants. Additionally, evaluation of online programming needs to be a prominent part of any efforts we make. We must constantly collect feedback that informs us of ways we can improve this programming.

Finally, we should consider hybrid programming, which includes a combination of in-person and online content delivery. These hybrid approaches can be especially powerful, as they allow for increased flexibility and customization. However, hybrid programming also means an extra layer of complexity in determining the optimal

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balance between in-person and online content. Educators must plan for different learning environments, ensuring all are suitable for their particular programming. If educators deliver programming to both remote and in-person participants concurrently, it can be challenging to ensure that both audiences are engaged and able to interact without difficulty. Due to this complexity, hybrid programming requires iterative experimentation and improvement to optimize its efficacy.

Ultimately, I am confident that Extension personnel can rise to this challenge. I have seen firsthand how the organization can respond and adapt to challenges. This adaptability is, in my opinion, one of Extension's greatest strengths, and I believe it will help us adjust to the post-Covid landscape and serve our constituents as effectively as possible.

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