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## Writing Panels Articulate Extension Public Value in the West

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## Writing Panels Articulate Extension Public Value in the West

### Abstract

In every era, publically funded programs seek to document their value. During the centennial celebrations of Cooperative Extension's legislation and establishment, this cry for data became even louder and the demand more intense. The Western Extension Directors Association (WEDA) tasked their Western Region Program Leadership Committee (WRPLC) to determine common measures in hopes that 15 Western States could aggregate data and effectively present results of Extension's work to stakeholders. Panels of experts from western land-grant universities were convened for an orientation to public value and a 24-hour "lock down" writing session. This tool resulted in six formatted white papers.

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In every era, publically funded programs seek to document their value. During the centennial celebrations of Cooperative Extension's legislation and establishment among the states, this cry for data became even louder and the demand more intense. The Western Extension Directors Association (WEDA) tasked their Western Region Program Leadership Committee (WRPLC) to determine common measures in hopes that the 15 Western States could aggregate data and effectively present results of Extension's work to stakeholders.

Because the Western States have such diversity in population, climate, cropping systems, and economies, the distillation of results into common measures resulted in reports that were virtually meaningless, such as, "we've done good work with youth," or "our crops are successful." Often, results were expressed only as numbers of participants while not illuminating outcomes. As early as 2004, public value publications and workshops have been circulating among Extension professionals (see Kalambokidis, 2004), and WRPLC members began to conceptualize documenting Western

regional Extension success as public value, rather than through common measures. This model seemed appropriate in documenting Extension "as nexus for locally relevant knowledge in a global setting," per the Timberline Manifesto (Reed, Swanson, & Schlutt, 2015).

## **The Tool: Writing Panels Convened in San Diego**

To document public value, panels of experts from western land-grant universities were convened for orientation to the concept by Nancy Franz and a 24-hour "lock down" writing session.

According to Franz (2013), the public value movement began in public administration circles. It fits well with Extension, as faculty have long used formative evaluations internally to improve their programs and yet also need summative data for external accountability. "Extension workers should use public value statements and stories in their work on a daily basis in a variety of ways to enhance their effectiveness and the transformative impact of their programs."

Public value articulation, suggests Franz (2011), helps Directors through their Extension communicators to:

- Create clear examples of the differences between public and private value derived from Extension programs,
- Create the case for and urgency of focusing on public value,
- List and prioritize the unit's public values, and
- Use public value statements and/or stories depending on the audience and venue.

The content areas were selected by WRPLC based on importance in the West and also the availability of expertise, and Directors were asked for nominations to the panels. Twenty-four experts participated, representing 10 states in the Western Extension Region. Also attending was the expert in public value, Nancy Franz, and several WRPLC members who acted as facilitators. Extension Directors paid travel costs and provided release time for panelists to participate.

## **The Assignment: 24-hour "Lock Down" for Writing**

The panelists arrived with laptops and previously identified relevant and useful data sources. There were no pre-ordained expectations. Each group was allowed to find its own way to determine the public value of the work. The participants were given an introduction to the idea of public value, and they were left to work with the facilitators to determine what form their final paper would take. For example, as the nutrition and physical activity groups met, they determined that the public value issue that they were both working on was reducing health care costs. They formed one large group and developed one public value statement reflecting the expertise and work of both panelist teams.

Within the context of public value, they considered community demand, documented needs, and local meaning of Extension work in the topic areas. They applied the lens of public value to document current work occurring in Extension and examine the importance of this work to the public. Current published data were used to confirm whether the "needle is moving" in making

progress in each of these content areas.

The final form of each statement was varied because of the free-ranging charge. Some of the final statements provide multipliers that are applicable for any Extension work, while others gave examples of public value that were currently occurring in the states.

At the close of the workshop, groups continued to meet electronically for up to 2 months to complete their assignment of a final paper for WRPLC review. One of the greater challenges was to get a series of products that were cohesive, that were enough alike to be a series. This required some reformatting and "filling in the blanks" to find a look that was appropriate for the papers.

## **The Next Steps: Papers Formatted and Presented**

Therefore, the next step involved formatting by members of the Association for Communication Excellence in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Life and Human Sciences (ACE) <https://www.aceweb.org/index.php/en>. WEDA wanted individual universities to be able to localize or personalize the white papers for their specific needs.

Six formatted white papers were presented to WEDA within 15 months of the initial charge, in a format that each university could brand for colors and logos, and also edit for state-specific data and stories. Authors determined titles:

- Community Self-Determination
- Reducing the Economic, Environmental and Social Costs of Climate Variability in the West
- Reducing Health Care Costs
- Preserve and Enhance Water, Soil, Forest and Range Resources
- Safe and Sustainable Water
- Youth Development

Each paper was organized to address relevance, Extension's response, and results. Sidebars may include partners, "by the numbers," "the bottom line," and/or references, as localized by each state. The aim to have a template that could be used by all states to determine state level public value has been realized, as some papers have already been used to create state level documents.

## **The Use of White Papers: Still Developing**

- In a brief follow-up survey (still in progress), a few panelists reported they "sometimes" use a public value viewpoint in their work, and some professional working relationships were formed.
- Ongoing opportunities for panelists to work together are developing.
- During the Western Region Joint Summer Meeting of WEDA, Western Association of Agricultural

Experiment Station Directors (WAAESD) <http://www.waaesd.org>, and the Administrative Heads Section of APLU there were facilitated discussions on each paper.

- Additional next steps will depend on usability of the white papers by Extension Directors and communicators.

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- Physical Activity \*Roxie Dinstel, AK; Linda Tannehill, AK; Anne Lindsay, NV; Dori Babcock, WA
- Sustainable Ag \*Jon Boren, NM; Rebecca Hill, CO; Roslynn Brain, UT; Doug Collins, WA; Bridger Feuz, WY
- Water \*\*Frank Flavin, NV; Pete Taylor, CO; Kelly Kopp, UT; Bob Simmons, WA
- Climate Change Frank Flavin, NV and Linda Tannehill, AK

In addition, the final form of the presentation was the work of ACE and its then president, Joanne Littlefield, Director, Extension Outreach and Engagement at Colorado State University, with the support of Dr. Lou Swanson, Vice President for Engagement and Director of Extension.

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