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Non-Traditional Extension Education Using Video Conference

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Non-Traditional Extension Education Using Video Conference

Abstract

This article describes Extension efforts to connect clients in remote rural areas to a wide variety of educational opportunities. This includes improving access to the land-grant system for people who live a great distance from campus as well as establishing new relationships with educational providers that are not a part of our traditional offerings. We describe some success stories in delivering non-traditional programming to new clients and discuss some of the issues arising from this new venture.

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Introduction

Prior to videoconferencing, for-credit university programs for adult learners required the student to travel to a campus location. This was difficult for older-than-average and other non-traditional students. Studies conducted throughout the years have all shown there is a strong need for distance education in our rural communities.

Potential students indicate they are constrained by financial and time pressures, commitments to family and jobs, and responsibilities to the operation of the family farm or business.

Clients also indicate they need training beyond the traditional offerings of our land-grant system. They need to be connected to educational resources ranging from plumbing certification to human resource management to nursing, as well as to the more traditional agriculture and family management training offered by Extension.

Extension serves many clients who live great distances from university campuses. By utilizing videoconferencing, educators are successfully facilitating connections between their clients and educational resources located anywhere in the world.

Training in Action

Videoconferencing has been used for years in a variety of ways throughout our state. Following are a few of our success stories.

"It's been great. We can get a one or two hour class without using up a whole day traveling," Pat Carroll, Adams County Auditor.

In the past, continuing education for Pat Carroll meant traveling to Bismarck, North Dakota to attend training--a 300-mile round-trip. This distance may often require an overnight stay. The time and expense of this travel are a burden on county government budgets and a staffing problem in a small office. Through videoconferencing, Carroll has participated in training on delinquent taxes and the taxation process, budgets and other auditing topics, using time wisely, Americans with disabilities act, family medical leave act, and workers compensation.

"We have been waiting for this technology for years," Harvey Peterson, Golden Valley County Extension Agent

Harvey Peterson recently brought the High Profit Wheat School taught by agronomists at the campus of North Dakota State University (NDSU) to his county. Because Golden Valley County is 350 miles from NDSU, attendance by local producers on campus or bringing instructors from the campus to the county is cost and time prohibitive. The High Profit Wheat School included specialists in wheat breeding, plant nutrition, plant disease, weed and insect control, and crop marketing. Local producers were grateful for the opportunity to attend this multi-session school.

"Continued education allows individuals to continue to live here while training or retraining in a profession of their choice," Melana Howe, Chief Nurse Executive, West River Regional Medical Center

West River Regional Medical Center serves an 18,000-square mile area of the western Dakotas. It is the only full-service medical facility available for many residents of this area. The medical center has long identified a need for licensed practical nurses and has difficulty recruiting LPN's to serve in such a rural area. Distance education has allowed the medical center to train local residents to fill these critical jobs. This accomplished two positive outcomes: filling the nursing shortage and creating new employment for residents.

Issues

Successfully providing credit courses required numerous organizations to collaborate. Multiple campuses, the state interactive video network system, the state information technology department, local organizations needing employee training, local facilitators, and the students all need to work together to accomplish the task.

Several issues arose with this new collaboration. They included working with universities we have not worked with before; working in subject matter areas different than our traditional agriculture, youth and family programming; and accommodating a "campus coming to the student" model, rather than the traditional reverse approach.

Facilitating a relationship between our clients and a college or university not our own creates new challenges. As the facilitator for a program being delivered to the local site, the student sees the Extension professional as the go-to person for help in solving any issue that arises during the course of study. While we may feel comfortable helping answer questions relating to courses offered by our home university, assisting students enrolled at another institution can be problematic. This forces us to take the time to quickly build relationships with different campuses so we can assist students or direct them to an appropriate resource.

In the same way, as we facilitate education in areas of study different from our training, we need to learn who the contacts are to provide student assistance to this new clientele. For example, facilitating a nursing class at an agricultural research center quickly revealed that we needed a strong relationship with the staff at the college of nursing so the students using our facility felt connected to their program in the same ways that on-campus students were.

Finally, while distance delivery of education is not new, videoconferencing as a delivery method and responding to the wants and needs of the remote student have made distance delivery much more labor intensive for the facilitator at a remote site. As we expand beyond traditional Extension non-credit training by facilitating more credit offerings, we need to prepare to proctor tests, distribute daily class materials, send and receive faxes, take roll call, and complete other small tasks that increase the facilitator's workload and time commitment.

The rewards of adding more diverse educational offerings for our rural clients far outweigh the additional burdens. The people served are often new clients to the Extension service. Facilitating credit education allows us to interact with a new and diverse audience.

Future Plans

The education being offered through videoconferencing has been so successful that we now recognize the need to provide more student services than the current staff can supply. To make our rural locations a true learning environment, connections with distant teachers, accessing campus services (such as financial aid, and student counseling), and providing a liaison between local students and the numerous universities delivering education to each location all need to be strengthened. To fulfill these duties, we are searching for funding to hire a distance education learning center coordinator. Questions are also being raised about how to administer tests and bring needed university resources to the students.

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