

4-1-2004

You, Extension and Success: A Competency-Based Professional Development System

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Recommended Citation

Stone, B., & Coppernoll, S. (2004). You, Extension and Success: A Competency-Based Professional Development System. *The Journal of Extension*, 42(2), Article 20. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol42/iss2/20>

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April 2004 // Volume 42 // Number 2 // Ideas at Work // 2IAW1

PREVIOUS ARTICLE ISSUE CONTENTS NEXT ARTICLE +

You, Extension and Success: A Competency-Based Professional Development System

Abstract

Achieving the mission of the Cooperative Extension System and maintaining our strength as educational leaders are hinged on our professional competence and technical expertise. An unrelenting spotlight on professional development will match the level of excellence we expect from ourselves and ought to have for Extension in order to create a statewide, national, and global impact. So where to begin? This article describes the five elements of You, Extension and Success! (YES!), a competency-based professional development system. YES! offers a starting point for Extension employees to focus on professional goals, increase personal fulfillment, and make a real difference in Extension.

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Introduction

Achieving the mission of the Cooperative Extension System and maintaining our strength as educational leaders are hinged on our professional competence and technical expertise. Today as never before, professional development will help us achieve the level of excellence we expect from ourselves and ought to have for Extension in order to make a statewide, national, and global impact.

Texas Extension has developed a competency-based professional development system entitled You, Extension and Success (YES!). There are five main components to YES! including: the Texas Extension competency model; communication and information; professional development planning; learning opportunities and resources; and a tracking, integration, and accountability component.

Texas Extension Competency Model

The foundation for YES! is a set of core competencies that were built from focus groups and interviews with Extension faculty: they describe the knowledge, skills, and attributes that make Texas Extension employees successful in their jobs. The competencies represent six broad categories:

- Subject Matter Expertise--Expert knowledge, and skills in the area for which an Extension educator is responsible. This category also includes skills in providing education and instruction, solving problems, and integrating technology.

- Organizational Effectiveness--Accomplishing the mission of Extension through program development and evaluation, as well as building relationships and acting with accountability.
- Develop and Involve Others--Maintaining healthy relationships with other people to meet the needs of Extension's clientele. This includes mentoring, delegation, teamwork, facilitating groups, and providing direction for volunteers.
- Communications--Communicating effectively in interpersonal and group situations, whether through written or oral means.
- Action Orientation--Taking the initiative, valuing the role of positive change, creating a vision for the future and working diligently toward goals.
- Personal Effectiveness--A commitment to the Extension profession as well as balancing all aspects of personal and professional life.

In addition to the competency model, other YES! components include:

- Communication and Information
- Professional Development Planning
- Learning Opportunities and Resources
- Tracking, Integration, and Accountability

The **communication and information** component is the central source for professional development in Texas Extension and includes Web resources for new, mid-career, supervisory, and support personnel. It also includes degree information, scholarships, and announcements related to professional development.

The **planning component** is based on a partnership between the individual and the supervisor. It results in an action plan that outlines an employee's professional development goals and the steps needed to meet those goals. The planning component includes guidelines, a competency-based self-assessment to target areas for development, and a Web-based tool to create an individualized development plan. Using the individualized plan, faculty can specify their short-term performance goals as well as their development needs related to their career goals. They can view and update the Web-based plan regularly and during program planning time.

Data from the needs assessment tool can also be aggregated and used by the organization to help make decisions about training and development priorities. This shifts the focus from "spray and pray," to targeting audiences with specific training and development needs where impact can be measured.

The **learning opportunities and resources** component provides relevant and appropriate professional development opportunities. Aggregate data from the planning component of the system is considered, as well as the recognition that needs change based on length of service, experience, or change in assignment. This component also recognizes that learning takes place in a variety of settings: face-to-face workshops, self-directed learning, graduate programs, certifications, shadowing an expert, fieldwork, or learning derived from a challenging project.

Learning opportunities and resources available from departments, program units, and other providers external to Texas Extension will be communicated through a Learning Opportunities Catalog. Resources may include workshops and conferences; printed, online, video, audio self-directed media; or certification curriculum.

Specialists and other training providers can access on-line course development tools. The focus on professional development priorities and the use of on-line collaboration tools should reduce duplication of effort and improve the quality of training and development.

An on-line registration system will be developed in the coming year. Staff will register on-line for training opportunities; instructors can monitor registration and communicate with those enrolled, or distribute materials in advance. Afterwards, the organizer can verify participation, conduct evaluations, and provide one-on-one follow-up.

The **tracking** component integrates professional development with other key systems within Texas Extension, including monthly reporting, performance appraisal, and career ladders. Individuals record their professional development activities and track their progress on professional development from year to year towards achieving their professional goals.

The **integration** component allows the individual to extract the information recorded in their personal development plan and use it in other reports, such as their annual performance appraisal and their career ladder or promotion file, and during program planning time.

The **accountability** component makes the Extension organization more accountable to its employees and for its resources. Reports from the YES! system may include an annual needs assessment, a review of the type of professional development experiences being offered, and actual training and development experiences that were delivered, in relation to the highest training priorities.

Conclusion

The systematic approach to professional development described here clarifies what it takes to be an outstanding Extension professional, demonstrates organizational commitment by offering tools to assist professionals, and integrates organizational processes that make it possible to be more decisive in identifying and addressing critical areas of need in Extension professionals. YES! makes it possible to be more responsive to program opportunities, while providing greater fiscal, staffing, and program agility.

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