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## Communicating Impacts

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## Communicating Impacts

### Abstract

This article addresses the need to share Extension program impacts with our constituencies and groups that fund our programs. The article reviews the literature surrounding the need for communicating impacts with decision makers. It also identifies two reporting mechanisms used in one state, County Narrative Reports and the Extension Accountability Reporting System (EARS), that are successfully working to share program impacts with county commissioners, legislators, and the general public. The success of these two reporting systems is based on level or increased funding we have received at the county and state level since the implementation of these two systems.

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*The void created by the failure to communicate is soon filled with poison, drivel, and misrepresentation.* ~ C. Northcote Parkinson (Patterson, 2002).

## Communicating Impacts Strengthens Partnerships

Communication is key in any partnership (Covey, 1990). Communication encompasses several directions: nonverbal (smiles, head nodding), verbal (the spoken language), and active listening, the most critical of all forms of communication (Walton, 1989). Peter Senge added dialogue to the communication skill set. He defined dialogue as the capacity of members to suspend assumptions and enter into genuine thinking together (Senge, 1990). Communicating impacts to decision makers is one way we can strengthen partnerships.

For many years, county Extension offices and state Extension systems have had to maintain a delicate balance with their partners: campus and college partners, county commissioners and boards, state legislatures, and the Cooperative State Research, Education, Extension Service (CSREES) federal partner. All of these partners and others not identified are valuable assets for the success of the Extension program. The federal, state, and local partnership provides funding and other resources, as do some agency, foundations, and organization partners. The employees and Extension systems benefiting from this funding must communicate effectively when reporting program impacts.

Diem (2003) defines impact as making an impression, the positive differences we make in people's lives as a result of our programs. He provides a process for developing and promoting Extension programs that includes reporting the results. Diem recommends basing reporting procedure and content on audience needs. He urges the writer to keep in mind the audience's reading level and actually how much information you think the audience wants to know.

The Kellogg Commission's Third Report on engagement authors offered a seven-part test for engagement: (1) Responsiveness; (2) Respect for partners; (3) Academic neutrality; (4) Accessibility; (5) Integration; (6) Coordination; and (7) Resource partnerships (Kellogg Commission, 1999). Number 2, Respect for partners, emphasized that the purpose of engagement is not to provide the university's superior expertise to community but to encourage joint academic-community definition of problems, solutions, and definitions of success/impacts.

## Reporting Impacts to Local People

In addition to the more common Annual Extension/Experimentation Station Report used by many states to report impact and the one-page impact sheets used by many states, there is another method for communicating impacts to the public: one-page papers called "County Narrative Reports" that are used in reporting local impacts. The purpose of the County Narrative Report is to assist county commissioners in understanding the Extension Service program planning process and showing Extension programs can produce participant behavior change and long-term positive impact.

County Narrative Reports commonly include:

- Identification of collaborators and resources they bring to the program;
- Identification of the audience for the program;
- Definition of expected outcomes;
- Identification of delivery methods;
- Name of program;
- Number of participants;
- Short-term outcomes;
- Additional plans to address the problem and delivery methods;
- Audience follow-up for identifying intermediate and long-term outcomes; and
- Success stories reported by participants.

County agents have reported that some county commissioners still require a monthly event calendar in addition to the County Narrative Report.

## Statewide Reporting System

A second impact reporting method used is the Extension Accountability Reporting System (EARS). This electronic system was developed by the University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension Service to report program successes. EARS provides a format for reporting program successes and impacts similar to the County Narrative Reporting system. The system was implemented as a communication tool. The EARS electronic system requires criteria similar to the criteria for the County Narrative Reports. County agents and Extension specialists access the electronic system through their passwords.

Agents and specialists enter demographic information, including key words used to identify the topic in a key word search. The reports focus on quantified outcomes/impacts in terms of knowledge gained, practice changed, attitudes changed, dollars saved, and policy/law changed. Agents and specialists are encouraged to include case studies, stories, and testimonials. Moxley (2000) addresses the importance of story telling as a powerful medium for creating and making meaning of our lives and our work in communities.

The EARS report should answer these questions:

- What difference are you making?
- What have you done to make a difference?
- Did you do what you said you would do?
- What are the social, economic, or environmental impacts?

The report should answer the "So What?" and "Who Cares?" questions.

## Challenges

Communicating with partners is not without its challenges. Often we are our own worst enemies. We can think of lots of other things we want to do instead of reporting our impacts to the public. It does take time away from the pleasure of teaching and connecting with people. However, using these two methods for reporting we have communicated impacts and strengthened our partnership with decision makers.

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