A Look at Program Planning

**We need more solid fact and less assumption,
more evidence and less sentiment
to make planning effective**

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PROBABLY no other single professional activity of the Extension worker receives as much time and attention as does program building. Somewhere around one-third of all staff members get training in the subject every year, and about one-sixth of all staff time is devoted to organization and planning.[1] Program building is the topic of courses, seminars, workshops, training meetings, circular letters, individual correspondence, and of countless direct confrontations between agent and supervisor. Nearly every state has one or more specific procedures to be followed, with timetables to match.

Yet, there is a distinct possibility that our procedures for planning and the principles on which they are based are inadequate for our purposes and, in many cases, just plain wrong. We have two kinds of evidence to support this statement. One is the fact that some recalcitrant Extension workers have for years carried out highly successful programs without engaging in formal program planning at all. It is impossible to guess how many more have merely gone through the motions of program planning to meet a formal requirement. In spite of this, the activities of many of these workers are forward-looking, purposeful, and obviously constitute an organized effort.

Secondly, as we work with new areas of subject matter and new

[1] In 1963, an estimated 4700 persons received some training in program development and 3700 were reported as having been trained specifically in that subject. See *Report of Programs in Extension Education for Professional Extension Workers, 1963* (Washington: Federal Extension Service). In 1962, 623,552 man/days—17 per cent of the total time reported—were spent in Extension organization and planning. See *1962 Statistics on Activities of the Cooperative Extension Service* (Washington: Federal Extension Service).

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audiences—and as our old audiences become more sophisticated and specialized—we are finding that old procedures and concepts of program planning do not always provide an efficient basis for devising workable programs. Several shortcomings have become evident:

1. Conventional methods[2] of program planning are often inefficient. The almost universal use of lay advisory committees often results in an entire committee doing what could have been accomplished in less time by fewer people. The general practice of beginning the planning procedure with a general description of the situation often results in the collection of useless information. (In one instance I know, the situation study for a farm and home management program dug up the hours kept and number of books loaned by the local public library—a fact no doubt important to many people, but irrelevant to that program.) The effect of inefficient procedures is seen in a frequently reported lack of interest by lay people.

2. Conventional procedures offer little or no guidance for converting the objectives and situational data they produce into workable teaching activities. The result is that, even if the Extension worker manages not to get bogged down in describing the situation, he has trouble using the results of the planning activity in any meaningful way to arrive at specific teaching methods. As a result he often falls back on a repetition of past activities or on the uninspired use of standard procedures.

3. Conventional procedures are preoccupied with objectives. While a focus on objectives is desirable, it is also necessary to consider realistically the problems of implementing programs to achieve them. Observation would indicate that the availability of resources does affect what we try to do—at least to the point of affecting our choice among acceptable objectives. From a practical standpoint then, a planning procedure which does not provide for determining

[2] While "conventional methods" will vary in detail from one instance to the next, the term is used here to refer to programming procedures now in general use. In general, they are characterized by the following activities which are usually performed in approximately the following order: (1) formation of lay advisory groups; (2) exploration and description of the general situation; (3) determination of problem areas and assignment of priorities; (4) statement of objectives; (5) preparation of a written program and plans of work; and (6) program evaluation. Descriptions of methods of this type may be found in *Guidelines for County Extension Program Planning and Projection* (Washington: Federal Extension Service, 1959, mimeographed); in J. P. Leagans, *Some Principles and Concepts of Extension Program Development* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1961, mimeographed); and in E. J. Boone, "Needed Research in Extension Program Development," *Proceedings of National Extension Training Conference, 1963* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1964).

resource needs, for testing the availability of resources, and for resource allocation cannot guide us as to the feasibility of the plan it produces, and is incomplete.

4. Conventional procedures for program planning are usually stated in terms of things to be done rather than of things to be accomplished. We are told, for example, not only that the situation must be explored (a thing to be accomplished), but that we must use a committee of lay leaders to explore it (a thing to be done). The possibility of differences in situations or in people or in the kind of planning involved is not allowed for at all.

5. We seem to assume that piling up masses of situational data will somehow give rise to objectives, and thus to teaching activities. It is logically impossible to make any systematic observation of a situation in the absence of some objective. Every position in Cooperative Extension has certain objectives built into it, deriving from the purpose for which it was established. Failure to recognize these general objectives as limits in program development can lead to the collection of useless data and the development of unacceptable plans.

6. We also tend to assume that all good planning will follow a single process which always begins with a problem and ends with a solution. In fact, this is true only part of the time. Much of our planning in Extension is concerned with finding objectives to be reached by already-selected methods. What else is it when we plan how to best use a county fair or a regularly-scheduled television program for educational purposes which have not yet been determined? Is it reasonable to expect that a set of procedures designed to work in a "objective-to-method" situation will work in a "method-in-search-of-an-objective" one? Preliminary results from research now underway at Cornell indicate that there are at least these two main types of planning—and that there may be more.

SOME PROPOSALS

It is much easier to point out the supposed shortcomings of our program building processes than it is to propose workable remedies. One reason our current practice works poorly at certain tasks is that the tasks are difficult to perform. The following ways of looking at program planning and in our methods of accomplishing it would be of some help, however.

We must accept planning as a continuing way of solving educational problems, rather than a series of specific activities, undertaken at certain times of the year, and resulting in written programs.

We have no evidence at all indicating that there is such a thing as *the* planning process. Some ways of analyzing and solving problems may well be better than others, at least for certain purposes. But planning, as a problem-solving technique, should apply at all levels of problems, from the written five-year plan to the strategy for the next ten minutes of a discussion.

We must be careful to think of the process(es) of program planning as a series of events or things to be accomplished rather than a series of specific activities or procedures. We can think of understanding the situation as one event in the process, for example, knowing that it may be accomplished in some cases by a survey committee and in other cases by a county worker from his own knowledge. If we are going to use organized planning at all levels of problems, we have to keep our methods flexible.

We must be alert to the possibility that different situations may call, not just for different planning procedures, but for entirely different planning processes. For example, the planning for a single show in a television series begins with the general teaching methods already chosen. (It is unlikely that you would decide to substitute a meeting at the last minute.) This process may be entirely different from that used in planning a resource development program where not even the more specific objectives have been reasoned out and where even the most general methods have not been chosen. The procedures which will produce a good plan in the one instance may be useless in the other. We should be flexible enough to do both kinds of planning well.

We must be efficient in the use of our time and that of others. If we narrow our objectives from the general to the specific before trying to describe the situation, we can secure more specific data. We will, thus, get only what we need for a given bit of planning, and avoid the accumulation of useless bits of detailed information. We must also avoid involving people in planning where their involvement serves no real purpose.

We must deal realistically with the problems of implementation. We can't, in the end, do more than we are equipped to do. Considering problems of securing and allocating resources at all stages of planning will permit us to adjust our expectations to what is possible, but more importantly, early recognition of implementation problems may lead to their solution in time to permit action.

We must take a more objective view of the involvement of lay people in program determination. Their involvement in some program planning tasks at some levels may be an efficient means of program building. For example, they often have information neces-

sary in planning not otherwise available to us. We may also involve lay people in program building for other reasons than the efficient production of workable plans. We may involve them as a means of teaching them to plan, or because we believe in the right of the responsible adult to take part in planning things which affect him. We may hold the theory that involving our clients in planning will secure their support in carrying out the program. These are all good reasons, but none of them has any functional relation to planning. It is important that we recognize this involvement as a means to an end and use it only when the results justify it.

CONCLUSION

Cooperative Extension today is attempting to deal with an increasing range and depth of problems. It is trying to reach new audiences and to capitalize on the availability of new teaching methods. It is obvious that this means some adjustment in our programs. It also means that we must be willing to evaluate and adjust the ways in which those programs are planned.

This paper has been an attempt to point out some areas in which our present planning methods may be out of tune with present needs, and to suggest some ways of improving them. No specific procedures have been suggested, because procedures will vary with the situation, the kind of problem, and the person doing the planning. There has been another reason as well: we don't know enough about the nature of planning to make specific recommendations.

If we are to find out more about program planning in Extension, there is something for each of us to do. All of us, but especially agents and specialists, can become more conscious of our planning techniques and can study and experiment in an effort to become more proficient at planning. *Administrators and supervisors* can assist in this through direct help and guidance and through insuring that planning requirements and procedures are flexible enough to permit experimentation. Standard procedures are often the fossils of obsolete methods.

Finally, *teachers and researchers* in this and related fields can contribute by increasing our understanding of planning itself. This means studying it in other applications, as in industry or national defense, and from the point of view of other disciplines. Most importantly, however, it means doing empirical research on the nature of programming rather than studying the procedures associated with it or attempting to construct procedures built on incomplete knowledge. We must have more solid fact and less assumption.