idea corner

Why Reinvent the Wheel?

As Extension agents, many of us find there just aren't enough hours in the day!

NARS

One of the latest tools of the trade is called the Narrative Accomplishment Reporting System—NARS, for short. Since 1981, writeups of successful state and county Extension programs have been stored in the NARS computerized database. NARS has evolved from a system designed to strengthen accountability and evaluation information at the national level into a tool that helps Extension staff discover cost-effective methods for planning, delivering, and evaluating programs at state and local levels.

How can you gain access to this valuable information?

Suppose you want to plan, deliver, and evaluate a program in your county on financial management. A good starting point would be to find out what program approaches and materials have been effective in producing results for program participants in other states and counties. To find out what other agents have done, and what the results have been, access the NARS database. When accessing the NARS database, you're asked to enter a keyword. Since your interest is "financial management," you enter those two keywords.

When searching the accomplishment reports for 1982, the system locates 371 reports containing the keywords "financial management," cutting across agriculture, family living, community development, and 4-H. Because 371 reports are more than you care to read, you decide to zero in on a specific topic, "farm credit."

By entering the keywords "farm credit," NARS searches for only program reports that contain those keywords. The system responds that it has 14 occurrences for the keywords "farm credit" and asks if you want to scan the 14 report titles before reading the reports or if you want to go ahead and read (printout) them. Because a review of the titles might suggest that the program isn't relevant to your local situation, you should scan the titles before reading the reports.

*Good Ideas
from Other Staff*

By entering the term "scan," the 14 report titles are listed. All of the listed programs appear to have potential for application in your county. You decide to read all 14 and enter the command "read."

NARS proceeds to list out accomplishment reports on farm credit from North Dakota, Kentucky, Maryland, Maine, North Carolina, California, Colorado, Ohio, Illinois, Missouri, and Vermont. You quickly see that these programs have resulted in

money saved, costs reduced, young farmers obtaining financing, increased incomes, improved debt management, and more.

You read on and find already existing methods and materials that might be available for use in your county program. You also see indicators and methods used to measure the progress made by the program participants over time. And finally, you see the name, address, and telephone number of the agent or specialist responsible for the successful program. By following up with the contact person, you may be able to avoid reinventing the program wheel.

NARS can indeed be a valuable tool for program development.

As you search NARS with other keywords, you'll find many indicators and methods used to measure progress being made by Extension programs. Impact/result keywords such as "accidents reduced," "animal damage reduced," and "dietary practices improved" can be be used to locate program indicators and measurement methods.

NARS is available for online searching through a national telecommunication system. You simply connect your phone to a computer terminal in your home or office to obtain instantly a report on a desired topic. To access NARS, contact your state computer specialist.

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