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A Tool for Focusing Integrated Team Efforts on Complex Issues

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Abstract: Focusing the work of interdisciplinary teams to address prioritized issues is not an easy task. This new tool is designed to aid Extension educators in working with their integrated teams to dissect a complex issue by identifying the: 1) primary and secondary target audiences, 2) causal and contributing factors (i.e., root causes), 3) opportunities and threats to addressing and/or improving the issue, 4) program components to build in, and 5) resources to implement/carry out the different program components.

Introduction

Extension literature is clear that issues-based integrated (interdisciplinary) programming is needed to achieve large-scale impacts, demonstrate our public value, and use our strengths (DeBord, 2007; McGrath, 2006; Koenig, Cerny-Koenig, Hefelbower, Mesner, Kopp, & Hill, 2004; Seidl, 2003; Duncan & Foster, 1996; Hutchins, 1992). Two main barriers to issues-based programming are the lack of training/resources for Extension educators to help them: 1) make complex issues manageable and 2) focus their team to plan an interdisciplinary response to the issues (McGrath, Conway, & Johnson, 2007; Yang, Fetsch, Jenson, & Weigel, 1995; Baker & Verma, 1993; Taylor-Powell & Richardson, 1990). However, in an examination of Extension literature, there are few practical tools available to help educators conduct issues-based programming. In fact, there were no tools found related to working with interdisciplinary teams to turn issues into programs.

The tool provided in this article assists Extension educators in working with their integrated teams to dissect a complex issue by identifying the: 1) primary and secondary target audiences, 2) causal and contributing factors (i.e., root causes), 3) opportunities and threats to addressing and/or improving the issue, 4) program components to build in, and 5) resources to implement the different program components.

This tool is not designed to be used during one meeting. Rather, multiple team meetings will be needed to complete each item on the tool, reflect upon the ideas shared, gather additional information, and expand interdisciplinary team membership if necessary.

Integrated Program Team Working/Brainstorming Sessions Worksheet: A North Carolina Example

1. List your target audience(s), which should be **"Who has the issue and related needs currently (intervention) and/or who has the potential for having the issue/needs (prevention)?"**
Discussing this will help your team pinpoint the **primary audience(s)**.

Example: The primary audience will depend on whether the program is focused on prevention or intervention (or a combination of both). For the issue of childhood obesity, obese youth would be targeted for an intervention program. Youth who are overweight may be the primary target audience for a childhood obesity prevention program. Also, those youth who are not overweight but have some demographic or other characteristic that makes them more at risk than the general population may also be targeted for prevention efforts. However, a prevention-focused approach does not mean blanket targeting of all youth, but reflect programs of purpose to really reduce the incidence (new cases) of childhood obesity.

2. Discuss **"Who else is directly affected by the issue/needs?"** Be specific. Think about whether family, community members, or other groups are affected. Discussing this will help your team pinpoint the **secondary audience(s)**.

Example: In most cases, youth do not buy groceries, plan, or prepare meals. Therefore, programming efforts should also target parents, families, and/or guardians. At a minimum, the team needs to address what type of education is needed for parents/families in order to have a more comprehensive approach to a complex issue.

3. Discuss **"What is really causing or contributing to the issue/needs?"** for those primary and secondary audiences. Discussing this will help your team identify **"root causes"** and not just surface manifestations of the problem.

Example: The team must thoroughly discuss why the issue and its underlying needs really exist. So, if poor nutrition and lack of physical activity negatively contributes to the issue, then discuss why the targeted youth and/or their parents/families have poor nutrition, what are they consuming and why, why are they not getting enough physical activity. The answer is not just lack of knowledge. Continue asking "why?" to every point raised. Be as exhaustive in outlining as many contributing and causal factors as possible--even those that are beyond your team's expertise because later you will be asked to think about using external collaborators/partners to address program components.

4. Discuss **"Who/what can affect the issues/needs?"** Specifically, think about who/what can help and/or hinder improvement or resolution of the issue/needs. Think family and community certainly, but also consider culture and other characteristics of the primary and secondary audiences, as well as policies and systemic barriers. Discussing these will help your team identify **opportunities** (who/what can help improve the issue) as well as **threats** (who/what can hinder improvement of the issue).

Example: Focus on who/what can positively influence or affect those causal and contributing factors. Certainly school systems can affect the issue of childhood obesity. For instance, school vending machine policies and/or absence of physical education classes can be the catalyst for building in an advocacy component to the program. Also, lack of resources available in the communities where the primary audience resides such as parks and walking trails can factor in. Thus advocacy, community information, and mobilization can be a component in a comprehensive program that draws on the expertise of Extension Community Development educators. The team could discuss how to be stronger advocates, organize communities to be advocates, and/or provide information to those entities that can impact the issue.

5. Discuss the multidisciplinary nature of the issue and underlying problems and needs surrounding the issue by asking: **"What subject areas really need to be integrated into the program to address the contributing and causal factors?"** What expertise is needed to address any of the points raised in 1 - 4 above in order to really make an impact on this issue?" Discussing this will help your team determine the **subjects/topics** that must be taught in the program and the expertise needed to teach those subjects/topics. Discussing this will also help your team determine **other program components** that may be needed in addition to educational classes/workshops/events/activities to address root causes other than lack of knowledge.

Example: On the face of it, nutrition and youth development expertise are needed to more holistically address the issue of childhood obesity. Many Extension educators would stop here. Also, parenting/family development and community development expertise is needed. The team must think even deeper to focus on designing strategies for as many of the underlying contributing and causal factors as possible. If the focus is on obese youth (intervention), then clinical behavioral psychology, exercise physiology, and other expertise may also be required to develop a holistic strategy. If the primary audience is limited resource, then the expertise of Extension resource development/financial resource educator may be needed. The key is trying to address all causal and contributing factors through your programming.

6. Discuss **"What internal (NC Cooperative Extension, NC State University, NC A&T State University, county government agencies) and external (partners and collaborators) resources are needed?"** Discussing this will help your team determine where to draw **resources** to carry out the different program components.

Example: Do not be restricted by expertise in the College of Agriculture and Life Science; rather use the full extent of your land-grant university base, including other colleges, departments, units, and institutes within the 1862, 1890, and 1994 land-grant systems. At the county level, do not be restricted to just your county health department, given the childhood obesity example. Identify other county agencies as well as non-profits. Also, do not focus on just formal organizations, but seek, identify, and use assets of non-formal and informal community groups and associations. Use the expertise and resources listed above to build the different components of your program that address causal and contributing factors.

Conclusion

Focusing the work of interdisciplinary teams to address prioritized issues is not an easy task. This tool provides a good starting point to help teams begin developing comprehensive program components.

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