Obtaining High-Quality, "Low-Maintenance" Stakeholder Input: How to Create a Virtual Statewide Extension Program Advisory Committee

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Abstract: Effective advisory committees are the cornerstone of relevant, quality Extension programs. They provide stakeholder input to Extension personnel, which is required under the Agricultural Research, Extension, and Education Reform Act (AREERA) of 1998. This article describes the implementation of a virtual statewide Extension program advisory committee using e-mail. During three semi-annual virtual "meetings" to date, the committee has provided high-quality recommendations for Extension programming with a much "richer" discussion of suggested program content and delivery methods than was previously the case with face-to-face meetings. In addition, the time requirement for both the specialist and committee members was significantly reduced.

Introduction

Somewhere in the U.S., as you are reading this article, an Extension advisory committee is probably holding a meeting. A hallmark of excellence in Extension programming is engagement with clientele to plan, implement, and evaluate programs (Extension Excellence, 2007). Barnett, Johnson, and Verma (1999) noted that effective advisory committees are the cornerstone of relevant, quality Extension programs and cite the following benefits of obtaining diverse stakeholder input:

- Identifying problems,

- Providing direction to Extension personnel,

- Increasing program acceptance by the community, and

- Legitimizing current and planned Extension programs.

In addition, advisory committees can help Extension identify resources, reality-test proposed program ideas, develop collaborative partnerships, and gain insights into the practices and mindsets of target audiences.

Audience representation is especially valuable when the culture and/or socioeconomic status of learners are different from that of Extension personnel. Scholl (1989) found advisory committee recommendations to be among the top five methods used by Extension home economists (now family and consumer sciences or FCS agents) for determining local program needs, along with requests, questions from individual clients, results of other formal needs assessment procedures, and program spinoffs.

Not only does stakeholder input provide valuable benefits, but it is required by law. The Agricultural Research, Extension, and Education Reform Act (AREERA) of 1998 made gathering of stakeholder input mandatory. Specifically, AREERA requires land-grant institutions, as a condition of receipt of formula funds, to solicit and consider input about their programs from stakeholders. By October 1 of each fiscal year, recipient institutions must report to the U.S. Department of Agriculture actions taken to seek stakeholder input, a brief description of the process(es) used, and a statement of how collected input was considered (Stakeholder Input Requirements, n.d.). Methods of stakeholder input can include formal advisory committees, surveys (e.g., telephone, written, or online), and focus groups.

Despite their many benefits, advisory committees can be time consuming, particularly when Extension personnel are carrying out most of the leadership roles, such as deciding community problems, suggesting solutions, and setting program goals (Wegenhoft & Holt, 1988), as well as attending to meeting preparation tasks (e.g., room arrangements and refreshments). This article describes the implementation of a virtual statewide Extension program advisory committee that was developed by a state specialist. During three semi-annual virtual meetings to date, the committee has provided high-quality recommendations for Extension programming (e.g., suggested program content and delivery methods) and collaborations. In addition, the time requirement for both the specialist (meeting preparation) and committee members (travel) was significantly reduced.

Background

A statewide advisory committee was implemented by Rutgers Cooperative Extension (RCE) in 2001 to provide stakeholder feedback and suggestions about personal finance programs in compliance with AREERA. Initially managed by a team of Extension faculty, it transitioned in 2004 to management by a state specialist alone when FCS agents' focus became exclusively health education. Health finance was added as a program thrust. Advisory committee members include state and federal government officials, financial advisors, non-profit agency personnel, credit counselors, and county Extension faculty.

By 2007, attendance at semi-annual meetings had started to wane as members' busy schedules often precluded meeting attendance. Even though the 2-hour meetings began at 8 am, with travel, they often consumed a half-day. When gas prices rose to almost $4 a gallon in early 2008 and some members had their business travel restricted, it was clear that an alternative strategy for obtaining advisory committee input was needed. Thus, the idea of a virtual advisory committee was born.

Description

In many ways, the format of virtual advisory committees mirrors that of previous face-to-face advisory committee meetings. Instead of an oral report by the specialist about recent RCE personal finance programs and research, advisory committee members are sent a one-page bulleted list of accomplishments and works in progress every 6 months as an e-mail attachment. In addition, committee members are sent four questions and asked to provide a reply within 3 weeks. The specialist then summarizes members' suggestions and sends them out for review by committee members and for additional comments. Finalized "meeting minutes" are then compiled and serve as a "to do list" of ideas for the specialist to consider for implementation. In

addition, they are submitted by the specialist as documentation of receipt of formal stakeholder input under AREERA.

Two of the four advisory committee discussion questions have been asked during each of the virtual advisory committee meetings:

- Any suggestions for new program collaborators? Funding sources? Programs and program titles? Media outreach?

- Any other comments or suggestions about RCE programs?

The other two questions are changed for each "meeting." To date, they have included the following:

- What personal and/or health finance needs do you recommend that RCE develop programs and messages about?

- What are your clients' (or your) biggest personal finance or health finance concerns?

- What is the single most important thing that people want and/or need to know about personal finance today?

- What tools and resources do people need to make good personal finance and health finance decisions?

- Describe one creative and/or effective way to get financial information to people who need it?

- What is the best way to change people's lives for the better?

Advisory committee members' responses to these program-planning questions have had a richness and depth not previously experienced at face-to-face meetings. Because members are responding via e-mail, they can compose thoughtful replies and include helpful links to online resources. In addition, the specialist was able to recruit over a dozen new advisory committee members when they learned that meetings were held virtually and required minimal time and no travel.

Conclusion

It is possible to obtain high-quality feedback and recommendations from Extension advisory committee members without holding a face-to-face meeting. In addition, less preparation time is required of Extension personnel. Virtual meetings are especially helpful when stakeholders are spread out across an entire state. While a downside is loss of in-person contact, in many cases, Extension personnel will see advisory committee members at other venues and can spend some time together.

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