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[Return to Current Issue](#)

A Checklist for Interdisciplinary Teams When Planning Issues-Based Programs

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Abstract: A quick glance of the Extension literature will reflect a resurgence of interest and focus on integrated (interdisciplinary) issues-based programming. However, the development of methods, tools, and techniques for developing integrated issues-based programs has not kept pace. This article presents a checklist to aid interdisciplinary Extension teams through the basic steps involved in planning integrated issues-based programs.

Introduction

A program is a planned, comprehensive set of educational change strategies/activities that are based on documented, high-priority needs and are designed to produce behavioral changes among targeted learners that ultimately lead to social, economic, and/or environmental impacts. An integrated program is a collaborative approach involving partners and various disciplines planning and implementing one or more programs to affect individuals and their families (micro systems), communities, and society (macro systems) associated with one or more identified issue(s) (DeBord, 2007).

The future of Extension and the land-grant university system as a whole will depend, in part, on how well we listen and respond to the real issues facing our clientele (McGrath, Conway, & Johnson, 2007; Fehlis, 2005; McDowell, 2004). Extension must mature in its role of coordinating issues-based educational programs from a total university base (McGrath, Conway, & Johnson, 2007). Integrated programs offer a means by which Extension can address issues with more intensity, depth, and breadth. At the heart of integrated programming is using our vast Extension network of expertise and resources—our county and district/regional faculty, state specialists, administration, staff, and external partners, coupled with the resources and infrastructure of our internal land-grant university system, to create lasting impact on issues.

Current and past Extension literature is replete with scholarly writings on the benefits of and calls to action for more issues-based, integrated (interdisciplinary) programming (McGrath, Conway & Johnson, 2007; DeBord, 2007; McGrath, 2006; Koenig, Cerny-Koenig, Hefelbower, Mesner, Kopp, & Hill, 2004; Seidl, 2003; Duncan & Foster, 1996; Hutchins, 1992). But why hasn't it caught on throughout all of the State Extension Systems?

Again, Extension literature provides some potential answers. Extension scholars studied the implementation of issues-based programming during the early years of Extension's initial focus on it as a viable means for creating substantial change. The studies yielded recommendations for integrated issues-based programming from county and state Extension educators' perspectives. For example, a study by Baker and Verma (1993) found that Extension educators were confused about the process to be followed to conduct issues-based programming. Also, a study by Taylor-Powell & Richardson (1990) found that there should be an increase in uniformity in understanding and implementing issues-based programming.

In an examination of current Extension literature, there are still very few practical tools and resources available to help Extension educators conduct issues-based programming. There are tools and methods in the Extension literature that help educators define issues (Jenson, Warstadt, Daly, & Schuchardt, 1990), validate issues (Weigel, Fetsch, Jenson, Yang, & Rogers, 1992), cluster issues (Yang, Fetsch, Jenson, & Weigel, 1995), and analyze complex issues (Guion, 2009). However, tools and methods for specifically moving the interdisciplinary teams through the main steps of program planning as suggested in previous literature (Taylor-Powell, 1990; Baker & Verma, 1993) are not available.

The practical checklist provided in the next section of this article was developed to aid Extension educators by providing an overview of key tasks that need to be performed and critical questions that must be addressed when interdisciplinary teams are planning integrated issues-based programs.

Checklist for Interdisciplinary Teams to Plan Integrated Programs: A North Carolina Cooperative Extension (NCCE) Example

Before Designing an Integrated Program

- Using the NCCE process laid out for environmental scanning, have you specifically identified the priority issue your team is addressing?
- Is there agreement that the issue is a matter of a widespread public concern?
- Does the issue fit into one or more NCCE strategic priorities?
- Are there faculty/staff available in Extension with expertise on the issue? Are there Extension partners that need to contribute to resolving the issue? Where? Who?
- Can Extension, using network of its partners, make a difference with the issue?
- Are you familiar with ALL of the extension resources? Are you sure? How can you find out? Who can you ask about whom else to involve with this issue?
- Are there others in Extension working on this issue (other counties for example)? How can you engage others to compare strategies or partner with them?

- Are there other external organizations focusing on this issue? From what angle (What is their geographic focus, target audience focus, etc.)? Are they adequately addressing the issue? Is there a niche for Extension? How can you involve/engage other organizations?
- Have you identified underlying needs related to the issue and prioritized what needs you will begin with?
- Have you expanded the team accordingly to address the underlying needs?
- Have ways to recognize each team members' contributions been determined?

After Design and Before Implementation

- Have program objectives that focus on measurable outcomes and/or impacts been written by the team?
- Have the change strategies and educational activities been planned through a team approach including collaborators/partners?
- Do the change strategies really address different factors and needs related to the identified issues (multidisciplinary)?
- Do the change strategies really address different types of audiences who, in some significant way, can contribute to resolving the issue?
- Do the change strategies address the priority issue at different levels (individual, family, community, society, policy)?
- Are the change strategies logically linked and likely to produce outcomes and impacts needed to improve, if not resolve the issue?
- Do you have an implementation plan to make sure each team member's expertise is maximized?
- Did you consult with an evaluator to be sure that you will be able to evaluate your results appropriately? Did you obtain evaluation tools to measure the outcomes and/or impacts stated in the objectives?

- Did you consult with a marketing representative to be sure that you will be able to market your program and your results appropriately?
- Do you have a plan for sharing the results with key stakeholders?

Conclusion

The Cooperative State Research Education and Extension Service promotes the notion â to achieve, through interdisciplinary teamwork and collaboration, significant and equitable improvements in economic, educational, environmental, and social conditions of individuals, communities, States and territories.â Educational programs are a main vehicle for change used by Extension. This article provides keys questions that interdisciplinary teams need to answer related to the main steps in planning truly integrated issues-based programs.

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