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[Return to Current Issue](#)

A Comprehensive Process to Identify Issues in Extension

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Abstract: Issue identification is a critical first step in developing program for Extension faculty. The involvement of local leaders, either in person or electronically, is essential to maintain the relevance that Extension is known for. Expanding the scope to include commodity organizations, partners, and stakeholders on a district or regional level strengthens the process even more, creating a more comprehensive approach to needs assessment.

Introduction

The process of identifying relevant issues is fundamental to the program development model for Extension. The uniqueness that Extension offers is the involvement of local clientele in charting the course of the educational programs offered. The involvement of a representative group of local leaders in identifying and prioritizing the critical issues that a community is facing is paramount to maintaining the relevance of our programs. While long-term strategic visioning is a core responsibility of the Advisory Board, there is also a need to involve others in identifying issues relevant to the county (Ebling, 1985). Some potential means of ensuring a broad perspective are outlined below as options.

Option I—Issue Identification Forum

A group of local leaders will be identified and involved in a process to identify and prioritize issues for the county Extension program to address through educational programming. The forum will be conducted according to the following outline.

- Opening comments from the Board Chairperson will stress the importance of this process and keep issues focused toward those that can be addressed by education and are within the realm of Extension's mission.
- Participants will be divided into subject area groups, based upon the major area of professional or personal interest that each participant has. Each group will be facilitated by a Board member. The following groups are recommended:
 - ◆ Agriculture and Natural Resources—8-10 people (if production diversity calls for it, could be more than one ANR group, based on commodity areas such as crops and livestock or

Horticulture.)

- ◆ Families and Health—8-10 people (if issue diversity calls for it, could be additional groups dedicated to FCS issue areas.)

 - ◆ Community and Economic Development—8-10 people

 - ◆ Youth—8-10 people (youth and adults)
- A brainstorming session to identify potential issues will follow, with a member of the Board capturing suggestions and posting on flipchart paper within each small group.

 - Issues should be combined and grouped where applicable. The issues then will be prioritized using the nominal group technique, with each participant receiving 10 votes to select the top three to six issues that Extension should address, pertaining to the particular subject area (Place, 2007).

Option II—Advisory Board Issue Identification Meeting

Involving the Board exclusively will only work if the Board is sufficiently staffed with engaged and active community members. In order to receive input from youth, include members of the 4-H Council or other youth leaders in this meeting.

The Process

A meeting of the Board should be scheduled with Issue Identification as the sole agenda item. A minimum of 1 month prior to the meeting, members should be sent detailed instructions about what will be expected at the meeting, and they should be asked to come prepared to discuss a minimum of three to five issues that they feel are critical to the county and that can be addressed through education. Members should be encouraged to visit with their colleagues, friends, and other community leaders to gain a broad perspective prior to the meeting. In addition, the use of information received from the supplemental survey outlined below will be used by the Board as a source of issues to discuss and prioritize.

Supplemental Data Collection—Needs Assessment Survey

One of the more common methods used to determine community needs is through a needs assessment survey. A benefit of this method is that it allows participants time to think about their responses and allows for anonymity in these responses. With the availability of technology to most people today, an electronic survey is an excellent tool to use in determining issues for Extension. Respondents could be targeted to include key community leaders only or could also include a general call for input to anyone in the public who chooses to participate. This supplemental source should always be used with option II.

Engaging Partners and Stakeholders

An additional source of input and issue validation will be sought from commodity groups, industry organizations, partners, and stakeholders. It would be expected that each Extension region would host a

minimum of two listening sessions with these groups represented as follows.

A. Agriculture and Natural Resources Listening Session—Facilitated by the Regional Program Director for ANR to bring together District and Campus based subject matter specialists and the commodity/industry groups most important within that District/Region. This would also provide an opportunity to involve Research faculty in the issue identification process, and facilitate communication between stakeholders and Land-Grant entities. The issues that were identified during the Community Forums in the regions will be summarized and shared with attendees, and other issues that need addressing will be identified and discussed by the group.

B. Human Sciences and Youth Listening Session—Facilitated by the Regional Program Director for FCS to bring together subject matter specialists and stakeholder groups and/or partners that are located within the region. The process would be similar to the ANR Listening Session.

The inclusion of these Regional Listening Sessions facilitates enhanced partnerships, expands the availability of resources, and enhances communications with key stakeholders.

Conclusion

There are several ways to effectively identify issues to guide Extension in long-term strategic planning. The methods outlined above will be effective if we make it a priority and if we fully engage the Advisory Board in the process. The keys to having a successful needs assessment process are to be diligent, to involve the proper people who represent our target clientele, and to follow through on the issues that have been identified. This step is the first in the Program Development Model. If we do not get this step right, the rest of the model is on a very fragile foundation, and program excellence will be difficult to attain. Relevance is our key, and issue identification provides the direction to relevance.

References

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