Using Needs Assessment as a Tool to Strengthen Funding Proposals

Abstract

In an increasingly competitive funding environment, Extension Services nationwide seek to diversify their funding bases to conduct successful programming and communicate impact to stakeholders. In this article we suggest the use of the Proposal Enhancement Tool, a needs assessment based approach of determining the gap between the current situation and the desired situation, as it applies to a defined audience. This approach requires principal investigators to engage communities in defining the existing problems, determining causes of those problems, and collectively developing solutions to address them. When followed, this approach increases the potential for more successful grant proposals.

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Introduction

Historically, the Cooperative Extension System has thrived on a three-prong funding model that depends on directly appropriated funds from federal, state, and county government sources. A review of this model as Extension celebrates 100 years shows significant gaps in the potential for sustaining Extension programs across the nation. How will Extension navigate decreased federal, state, and local dollars to deliver programming with a lasting impact on our nation? Part of the answer may be through external funding (Hughes & Ledbetter, 2009) and other alternative revenue (Barth, Stryker, Arrington, & Syed, 1999); however, Extension professionals do not typically have training in developing these types of proposals. In this article, we suggest that a thorough needs assessment combined with the Proposal Enhancement Tool (PET, initially developed by a team at Purdue University), can strengthen those funding proposals and increase the chances for a successful bid.

Alternative revenue sources may include grant funding, subcontracting, and user fees (Barth et al., 1999). Although each of these approaches may pose some challenges on how Extension programs are delivered and who takes ownership, they still provide a vital link to developing programs that solve societal issues in our communities. If Extension is to successfully secure this alternative funding, Principal Investigators (PIs) must demonstrate that they understand the relevance of the issues to the

community, ensure reliability to conduct successful programming to address identified issues, and demonstrate ability to communicate impacts to stakeholders.

The Needs Assessment Process

The foundation of a successful Extension program is a solid needs assessment. A needs assessment requires investigators to define the current situation, the "what is" condition for current and potential stakeholders, and then collectively engage them in defining the "what should be" condition or situation. The difference between the two conditions can then be defined as the "need" or "gap" but only if the gap is measurable and real consequences exist for not addressing the gap (Altschuld & Kumar, 2010).

To successfully use needs assessment in conjunction with the PET may require up to three phases of assessment: pre-assessment, assessment, and post-assessment, or "proposal construction," as adapted from Altschuld and Kumar, 2010 (Table 1).

Table 1.

Chronology of Needs Assessment Phases as They Relate to Proposal Enhancement Process

Phase	Actions
Pre-Assessment	• Assemble diverse group of stakeholders and community members, potentially called a Needs Assessment Committee (NAC). • Gather background information, reliable data, and brainstorming ideas. • Analyze input to assess the 'what is' and 'what should be' conditions and consequences for not addressing defined issues. • Gather key secondary data, e.g. newspapers, libraries and prior studies on similar projects. • If secondary data clearly defines problem, process can safely move to phase three, 'post-assessment'. If data are not conclusive enough to decide about issues, then a primary data phase, or the 'assessment', can be used.
Assessment	• Utilize primary data strategies to gather more information and clearly define gap. Strategies may include tools such as surveys, focus groups, interviews, etc.
Post	

Assessment	Prioritize needs and craft solutions depending on identified causes. • Construct the proposal using the needs assessment data as inputs for the Proposal Enhancement Tool (PET). • This combination typically produces strong proposals that clearly identify the gaps, target population, secondary population, and how Extension is positioned to be the best vehicle to realize community goals.

The Proposal Enhancement Tool

The PET was initially developed and assembled by a team at Purdue University and was highly recommended by the "Grant Writers Zone" blog as a support to struggling grant writers in June 2010. The tool has been adapted at Oregon State University to better integrate needs assessment to strengthen programs and apply for funding. This revised version and the summaries used in this article are available at: http://extension.oregonstate.edu/employees/county-resources/grants-contracts-agreements.

The PET has three sections that use the needs assessment process to define the problem and aggregate solutions in a way that is transparent to funders. As noted in Table 1, it requires that Extension professionals engage community members to identify the issues and solutions rather than imagine them from the comfort of their offices, because true engagement involves more listening than talking (King & Boehlje, 2013).

Initial Issue Description & Anticipated Outcome Worksheet

The first section of the PET involves summarizing the needs assessment findings, precisely describing the current situation as well as the desired situation, the researched causes of any gaps between those two, the solutions to the gaps or needs, and the beneficiaries of those solutions.

Audience Definition Worksheet

The second section of the PET involves defining the characteristics of the proposal's primary, secondary, and tertiary target audiences—the people listed as beneficiaries of the solution in the previous worksheets. The characteristics include: age, education, urban or rural, income, gender, and ethnicity. This section also involves clarifying the immediate outcomes (skills, knowledge, abilities, etc.) that the target audience will receive as a result of the proposed solution being implemented.

Aggregation Worksheet

In this worksheet, the information from prior worksheets is assembled into a cohesive description of the situation, solution, and proposal to address the need. This set of worksheets also asks the author

to identify the other organizations that are or may be involved in similar work—potential collaborators or competitors. This helps to paint a big picture of what has to happen to address identified needs and serves as the summary document for any proposal ultimately submitted.

After completing the Aggregation Worksheet, the proposer should proceed with specifying the details of a proposal only if an audience has been identified with a need that can readily be addressed. If so, a series of worksheets guide the PI through defining a budget, creating an impact statement, defining the proposed activity's inputs and outcomes, and articulating an evaluation plan. Funders want these details especially as they relate to who benefits from funding and the impact the program will have on the target audiences. Therefore using the PET before responding to a grant's Request for Proposals (RFP) is a good way to keep focused on the need, the solution, and the scope. By aggregating this information in clear declarative sentences at the beginning of the proposal process, the proposers will be able to immediately indicate the potential impact and outcome of their requests, namely how the desired alternative funds will help in the development, implementation, and evaluation of action plans to solve the identified problems.

Conclusion

The needs assessment process solicits input from a diverse array of stakeholders affected by a particular issue. The PET helps refine and focus the needs assessment process, allowing the input to be compiled and integrated into a proposal for funding that clearly identifies both the beneficiaries and the impacts the program will have on target audiences. This process enables Extension professionals to write strong anticipated-impact statements in grants with specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and trackable goals so that proposals can compete and successfully secure external and alternative funding.

References

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