Effective Regional Community Development

Abstract

Times are changing, and so are Extension programs. These changes affect every aspect of the educational effort, including program development, project funding, educational delivery, partnership building, marketing, sharing impacts, and revenue generation. This article is not about how Extension is restructuring to adapt to changes; instead, it highlights the advantages and disadvantages and will focus on practical, real-world strategies that two Ohio State University (OSU) Extension educators have employed to successfully implement regional community development programs.

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Introduction

The logistics of marketing and delivering community development programs within a region are quite different than operating within traditional county boundaries. Like many Extension programs, Ohio State University (OSU) Extension has reduced its workforce, and many county educators are now working in multi-county areas. At one time, each of the 19 counties in two southern Ohio regions housed an Extension educator responsible for developing and implementing community development outreach efforts. However, after organizational restructuring and funding reductions, the 19-county area, which includes both urban and rural counties, currently has two regional Community Development educators, each responsible for developing and implementing a regional and statewide educational effort focusing on organizational, leadership, and economic development.

This article discusses strategies to add value to regional community development efforts. Building an effective team, working with established partners, and developing marketing materials that focus on deliverables to meet the needs of the communities within the regions are a few of the approaches discussed.

A Regional Approach

The skills and strategies to implement a county-based educational program are different from those needed to work within a region. Several critical issues must be considered. How do you tap into unmet community needs? Where do you find clientele/participants? How do you build partnerships, improve communication, and develop educational objectives?

Each of the two educators worked in and provided leadership to county Extension programs for more than 20 years. With the restructuring and organizational refinement of OSU Extension, the educators were redirected to work half of their time in neighboring regions, each comprised of nine to 10 counties, with the other half of their work assignment focused on using their respective specializations for educational efforts throughout the state. Shortly after the reassignments, the two educators met and decided to add value to the other's educational programming by combining efforts and working as a unique team, formed organically, in an effort to improve performance and find greater personal reward (Chatfield et al., 2004).

As the seasoned educators began to combine work efforts, they recognized the need to build a strong pattern of communication to begin to build the team. As noted by Kelbaugh and Earnest (2008), productive team development includes a pattern of communication that is established, open, mutually agreed upon, and timely. Combining distance communication via Skype and face-to-face meetings for program development and delivery, the educators were able to build a productive and enjoyable professional and personal relationship.

Although challenges may arise when working in a larger geographic area, recent studies have shown that a regional-based educational program provides greater levels of effectiveness and satisfaction than a similar county-based program (Schmitt & Barthlomay, 2009). The team's first focus for educational outreach was to explore strategies to use existing partnerships with businesses, local government, and community organizations. Program development opportunities grew from these established relationships. Due to declining economic conditions throughout the state, many county-based social service organizations experienced a decrease in funding, leading to fewer employees and a reduction in funded programs. These funding cuts have caused the organizations to meet their program commitments by contracting with other professionals to fulfill those educational needs. The Extension educators were able to partner with these groups, allowing both organizations to meet their shared goals.

To expand the circle of influence and outreach beyond their established groups, the educators developed a website designed to highlight program deliverables and provide educational materials. The site is housed within OSU Extension's Community Development (CD) webpages and allows for interested clientele to easily navigate to other CD-related content and information. In addition to providing marketing opportunities, the website also offers an outlet for the educators to share educational information and allows others to connect with OSU Extension CD content available on social media.

As noted by J. Richard Hackman in the *Psychological Science* article, "What makes for a great team?" (2004), effective team leaders possess the emotional maturity needed for their roles with other team members. Fostering emotional maturity is essential; however, it is a trait that tends to be developmental in nature and cannot be readily taught.

Over the course of the last 2 years, the educators have identified several advantages and disadvantages for implementing a team approach to regional educational programming. The advantages include:

- Freedom—to focus on individual strengths and further develop specializations;

- Synergy—in the shared creative process;

- Experience—with diverse audiences, using many skills developed over the years;

- A New Approach—including innovative strategies to build program resources, reach a diverse clientele, develop educational outreach, generate funding, and demonstrate program impacts; and

- Technology for Communication—to minimize travel expenses and facilitate communication, using Skype and smartphone applications, and to market and highlight collective efforts, with their team-developed website: http://go.osu.edu/seekexcellence

The educators have also found the following disadvantages.

- Freedom—With little structure, it's important to maintain a focus on program impacts and implementation.

- Synergy—Team members must remain aligned with regard to energy level, effort, vision, and program outputs.

- Experience—With a combined work experience of more than 40 years, the educators need to continue to remain open-minded to innovation and change.

- A New Approach—Marketing a regional educational effort is very different from marketing county-based or local programming efforts. Unlike county-based programming that often includes working within established relationships with local clientele, regional-based programming does not present itself with a built in audience.

- Technology for Communication—Under the best circumstances, distance communication requires patience and experience

Conclusion

Rather than drilling deeper into program specialization, these educators have adopted a broader approach to meeting the community needs within the regions and statewide. Targeted marketing and relationship building are essential components of the program effort. Likewise, an intentional focus on the interpersonal aspect of team development is also essential. Over the past 2 years, the team's efforts have generated revenues necessary to sustain their educational programs. While developing an effective regional program and forming a well-functioning team are challenging, time-consuming efforts, the benefits of these enhanced professional and personal relationships far outweigh the costs.

References

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