

Program Standards and Expectations: Providing Clarity, Consistency, and Focus

Abstract

The effort described in this article resulted from requests for clarity and consistency from new and existing Extension/4-H educators as well as from recommendations by university auditors. The primary purpose of the effort was to clarify standards for effective county-based 4-H youth development programs and to help focus the roles of 4-H professionals in developing and maintaining effective programs that contribute to the 4-H mission and highest priority statewide needs. Five major categories of expectations for all county 4-H programs were identified on the basis of a related model for 4-H program delivery. The approach described may be useful across Extension for achieving improved program quality, program transformation, and effective dedication of resources.

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Consistent Program Quality Requires Program Consistency

One of Extension's strengths is its flexibility across counties and states to address local needs to achieve locally desired outcomes. However, this also is a potential weakness when it results in inconsistencies, inefficiencies, disparate program quality, or lack of contribution toward meaningful common outcomes. Strategic planning at state and national levels, introduction of common evaluation measures, and other efforts to set national priorities have facilitated the development of broad standards and goals. For example, Langellotto, Moen, Straub, & Dorn (2015) described newly developed national standards for the Extension master gardener (EMG) program intended to "set a bar against which EMG programs could judge their performance, or . . . could work towards, if they have not yet met a specific standard" ("Implications for Future Work," para. 1) and to "provide better guidance . . . and promote consistency" ("Implications for Future Work," para. 3). Still, national plans typically are not detailed enough to provide specific, measurable outcomes, and standards are not always realized at the local level. Furthermore, program inconsistencies across counties sometimes result from variations in budgets, staffing, socioeconomic factors, and so forth (Harder, Moore, Mazurkewicz, & Benge, 2013). Therefore, developing meaningful common program standards and expectations for an entire state that does not resort to a lowest-common-denominator approach is a formidable challenge and not without controversy.

Program quality "has its roots in how effectively central questions are addressed and linked to desired outcomes,

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