Needs-Based Training and Online Resource for Managers of Rural Festivals, Fairs, and Events

Abstract

Festivals, fairs, and events (FFEs) provide rural communities with economic and noneconomic benefits. For the project described in this article, we conducted a needs assessment of Iowa FFE managers by surveying them about the challenges they face in event management and then used the results of the assessment as the basis for training sessions provided to rural FFE managers in five areas of the state and development of an associated event management resource. The resource can be used by Extension and outreach offices to provide local FFE managers guidance on managing FFEs. We discuss broader implications for Extension as well.

Keywords: festivals, fairs, events, event management tool kit, Iowa

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Festivals, fairs, and events (FFEs) have received considerable attention from educators and scholars. Recent research has focused on evaluation of sustainable events (e.g., Diehl, Swenson, & Wente, 2012), promotion of events through social media (e.g., Nordby, 2014), and festival evaluation (e.g., Hugo & Lacher, 2014). Extension has long been engaged with FFEs through involvement in county and state fairs and outreach events (Nicholson, 2011). For example, the state of Iowa has a strong tradition of fairs due to its agricultural roots, and over 100 fairs occur in the state every year (Association of Iowa Fairs, 2016). In addition to potential financial benefits of hosting a community FFE, numerous intangible benefits exist as well. For example, festivals and events provide something for locals to do (Allen, O'Toole, Harris, & McDonnell, 2011). Furthermore, destination leaders can use events as branding initiatives to encourage tourists to visit a community (Jago, Chalip, Brown, Mules, & Shameem, 2003), enhancing the economic well-being of the community. The study described in this article focused on *festivals,* celebrations concentrating on a specific aspect of a community, such as heritage, food and beverage, religion, or science; *fairs,* gatherings devoted to the exhibition of products of agriculture or industry; and *events*, nonreoccurring gatherings that create heightened expectations for attendees (Fenich, 2012).

Organizers of FFEs face numerous challenges when planning an FFE, such as those related to programming, financial planning, and marketing (Carlsen, Andersson, Ali-Knight, Jaeger, & Taylor, 2010). As a result, the festival failure rate is high (Getz, 2002). Because FFEs are becoming an important tourism resource for rural areas (Liang, Illum, & Cole, 2008), an opportunity exists to provide rural organizers and managers of FFEs as well as Extension office personnel with knowledge of event management. In this way, Extension as an organization can play a pivotal role in the execution of FFEs as economic development tools for rural communities. The project

we conducted lays the foundation for developing Extension resources that provide education in the area of FFEs. The aims of our project were (a) to conduct a needs assessment of Iowa FFE managers by surveying them about the challenges they face in event management, (b) to facilitate training sessions with rural FFE managers in five areas in Iowa based on the challenges identified through the needs assessment, and (c) to create an event management resource for FFE managers in rural Iowa based on the challenges identified through the needs assessment.

Methodology

We conducted our project in three phases (Table 1). In Phase 1, we performed a needs assessment of Iowa FFE managers. In Phase 2, we provided a workshop at five Iowa State University Extension and Outreach (ISUEO) offices to educate FFE managers and operators on event management topics based on the needs assessment results obtained in Phase 1. In Phase 3, we created a resource and posted it on the ISUEO website. Institutional review board approval was obtained before data collection.

Table 1.

Overview of Project Phases

Phase	Purpose	Target sample	Methodology	Sample size	Data analysis
1	To examine the challenges Iowa FFE managers face in execution of FFEs	Iowa FFE managers	Survey instrument	$n = 115$	Descriptive analysis
2	To facilitate five workshops for FFE managers in Iowa regarding education/training	Iowa FFE managers	Pretest/posttest	$n = 33$	Repeated measures
3	To create a resource that provides information pertinent to areas of need identified in Phase 1	Iowa FFE managers, ISUEO managers			

Note. FFE = festival(s), fair(s), and event(s). ISUEO = Iowa State University Extension and Outreach.

Phase 1

Our purpose with Phase 1 was to examine the challenges Iowa FFE managers face in the execution of FFEs. We developed a survey instrument consisting of three sections.

- Section 1 had one qualifying question: "In the past 10 years have you participated/volunteered/worked at a festival, fair, or event in Iowa?"

- In Section 2, 140 subskills pertaining to the education and training needs of Iowa FFE managers were listed, and survey participants were asked to use a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*) to rate each item in response to the question "In order to operate a fair, festival, or event, I need more information/education in the following area." The subskill items were adapted from competency standards identified in *Meeting and Business Event Competency Standards Curriculum Guide* (Meeting Professionals International, 2012), which were created as benchmarks for what an event manager needs to know to execute an event. We derived the survey items from 12 categories of event management competency standards, as shown in Table 2.

- Section 3 of the survey instrument contained nine demographic questions.

Table 2.

Event Management Competency Standards Categories and Subskill Examples

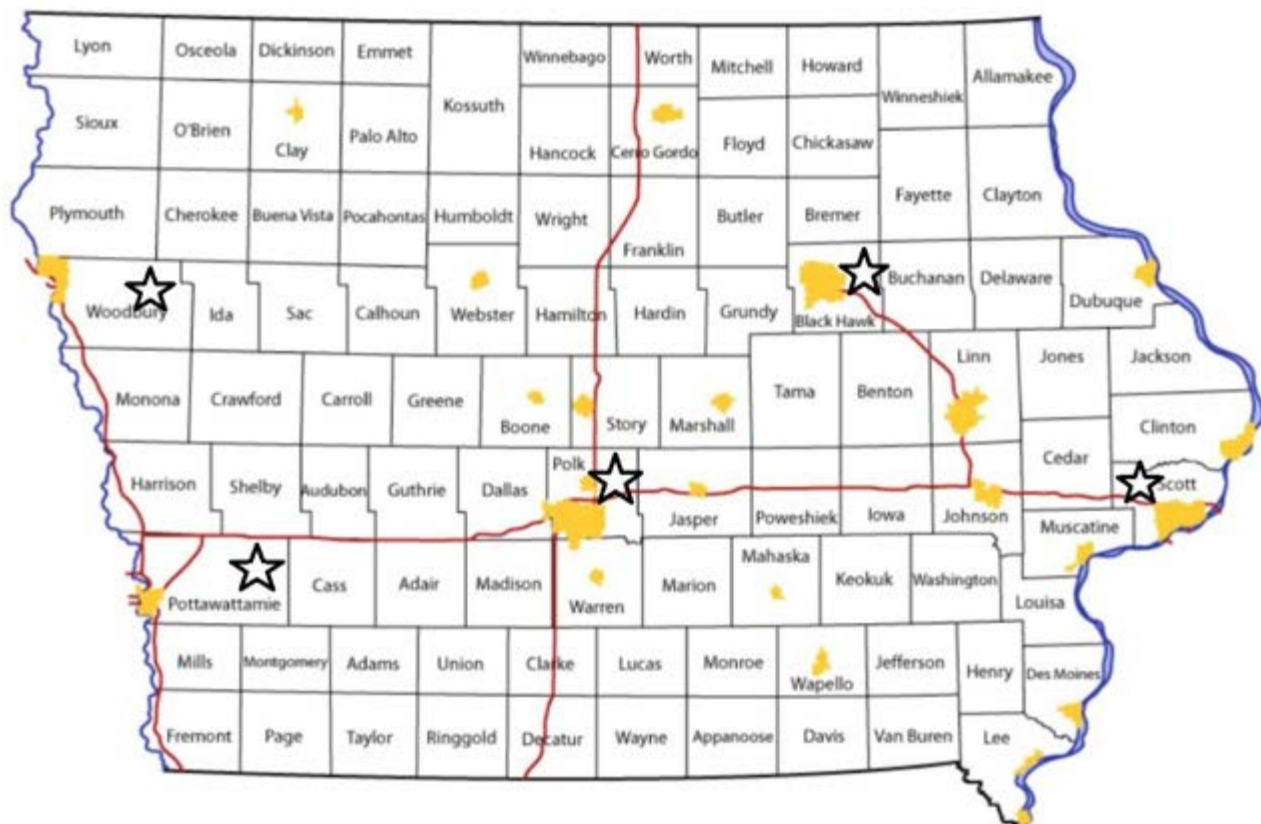| Competency category	Number of subskills in competency	Subskill example
Communication	6	Use communication tools
Meeting/event design	23	Determine requirements for staging/technical
Strategic planning	11	Develop an evaluation plan
Marketing	28	Develop branding
Project management	10	Establish milestones and a critical path
Site management	10	Determine food and beverage requirements
Financial management	12	Manage sponsorship processes
Risk management	5	Analyze risks
Administration	3	Cultivate relationships
Professionalism	12	Demonstrate leadership
Human resources	15	Supervise staff and volunteers
Stakeholder management	5	Manage stakeholder relationships

Note. Adapted from "Meeting and Business Event Competency Standards Curriculum Guide (MBECS)," by Meeting Professionals International, 2012. Copyright 2012 by Meeting Professionals International. Retrieved from https://www.mpiweb.org/docs/default-source/Research-and-Reports/MBECS-Guide-APP-2-Standards.pdf.

An online marketing firm recruited Iowa FFE managers to participate in the online survey. Of 298 respondents invited to participate in the survey, 112 respondents finished the survey instrument. This figure includes 39 respondents eliminated due to their not providing informed consent and eight respondents eliminated due to their not qualifying; thus, our final response rate was 37.6%.

Phase 2

Based on results of Phase 1, we developed a workshop and administered it to Iowa FFE managers. The purpose of the workshop was to provide rural FFE managers with knowledge and resources to operate a successful FFE. The workshop was conducted in five ISUEO offices in Iowa (Figure 1). We sent a recruitment invitation to industry and association contacts, all ISUEO offices, and Iowa State University economic development specialists. Our team's primary investigator facilitated the trainings over 3 days in April 2016. The 90-min workshop involved case studies, lecture, small-group discussion, and interactive activities relating to the five most important areas of need identified through the needs assessment survey (these five areas of need are identified in Table 5 in the "Results" section).

Figure 1.

Iowa County Workshop Locations

Note: Stars on the map represent locations of workshops. Map adapted from "State Map of County and City Maps," by Iowa Department of Transportation, 2018. Retrieved from https://iowadot.gov/maps/digital-maps/city-and-county-maps.

To examine evidence of learning, we had workshop participants complete a paper-based questionnaire as a

pretest before the workshop and a posttest after the workshop. The pretest/posttest consisted of 25 multiple-choice questions (five questions for each of the five topic areas the workshop covered). Respondents were encouraged to answer as many questions as possible, and no identifiers were collected. Additionally, we gathered demographic information on the workshop participants.

Phase 3

After completing the workshops, we created a resource based on the results of the needs assessment. Our aim with the resource was to provide FFE managers with up-to-date information pertaining to the five areas of event management for which needs assessment respondents felt they needed more training and education (see Table 5).

Results

Phase 1

A total of 136 Iowa FFE managers and operators participated in the needs assessment phase of our study. Table 3 shows demographic data for those participants. A majority (78.7%) were female, the average age was 35.4 years, and 61.8% had an undergraduate or postgraduate degree.

Table 3.

Demographics of Needs Assessment Respondents

Characteristic	No.	%
Gender		
Female	107	78.7
Male	29	21.3
Highest level of education obtained		
High school diploma	12	8.8
Some undergraduate education	40	29.4
Undergraduate degree	51	37.5
Some postgraduate education	11	8.1
Postgraduate degree	22	16.2
Type of FFE most often managed		
County fair	42	30.9
Cultural	25	18.4
State fair	13	9.6
Music	11	8.1
Sports	10	7.4

Other	35	25.7

As noted previously, respondents were asked to rate event management competencies in 12 categories to indicate the extent to which they felt they needed more information/education about each. Table 4 provides the resulting means and standard deviations by category.

Table 4.
Ratings of Need for Information/Education for Twelve Event Competency Standards Categories

Competency category	*M*	*SD*
Communication	5.13	1.55
Meeting/event design	5.07	1.56
Strategic planning	5.06	1.38
Marketing	5.03	1.60
Project management	4.94	1.39
Site management	4.93	1.56
Financial management	4.90	1.48
Risk management	4.76	1.36
Administration	4.65	1.44
Professionalism	4.63	1.62
Human resources	4.44	1.43
Stakeholder management	4.24	1.48

Note. Means are based on a rating scale of 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

The top five areas of need by subskill in order of priority from highest to lowest were awareness of existing regulations, managing crises and controversies, arranging security, developing cross-promotional activities, and developing media relations, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5.
Top Knowledge and Training Needs

Rank	Item	*M*	*SD*
1	Awareness of existing regulations	5.65	1.17
2	Managing crises and	5.50	1.30

	controversies		
3	Arranging security	5.32	1.37
4	Developing cross-promotional activities	5.29	1.34
5	Developing media relations	5.29	1.36

Note. Means are based on a rating scale of 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree.*

Phase 2

A total of 72 participants attended the five workshops, and 33 workshop attendees (45.8%) completed both the pretest and the posttest. As there were five multiple choice questions on each of five subject areas, the highest total possible was 25 points. Results indicated that 97.0% of respondents demonstrated an improvement in knowledge related to managing an FFE after the workshop. Using SPSS, Version 23, we conducted paired-samples t-tests to examine differences between responses on the pretest and posttest questionnaires. Results indicated a significant difference between knowledge scores on the pretest (M = 11.27, SD = 4.102) and those on the posttest (M = 15.21, SD = 4.227), $t(32)$ = −10.188. Next, we used a three-factor analysis of variance to examine differences by demographic variables. Levene's test (Levene, 1960) did not show a violation of the homoscedasticity assumption (0.615–0.959). There were no differences in improvement in learning by gender (F = 0.609, p = .777), highest level of education obtained (F = 0.956, p = .501), or type of FFE most often managed (F = 1.087, p = .410).

Phase 3

On the basis of the results of the needs assessment, we developed a 15-page resource, with the assistance of a professional graphic designer. The resource is available for download from the ISUEO website: https://store.extension.iastate.edu/Product/Event-Management-Training-Toolkit. After a brief overview of the project, the resource provides information and education pertaining to each of the five most important areas of need identified through the needs assessment:

- understanding existing Iowa regulations in areas such as permits, taxes, and marketing;

- managing crises and controversies that are natural, human-made, and technological;

- arranging various types of security, such as volunteer security, proprietary security, contracted security, and law enforcement;

- understanding advantages and disadvantages of cross-promotional activities; and

- developing media relations and creating a media relations timeline.

A listing of additional resources about FFEs, including recommended books and links to professional associations regarding FFEs, also is included. The resource can be used by ISUEO offices to provide Iowa FFE managers guidance on managing an FFE.

With the economic benefits of fairs and festivals having been well established in Iowa (e.g., Çela, Knowles-Lankford, & Lankford, 2007), the project we conducted provides knowledge for the continued economic and community-based success of FFEs in rural Iowa. Furthermore, ISUEO leaders can benefit from our work by gaining key insights related to the creation of an education program for rural managers of FFEs.

Conclusions and Implications for Extension Educators

Extension is a logical platform for providing educational opportunities related to the managing and executing of FFEs as FFEs provide a variety of economic outcomes for communities (see Getz & Page, 2016, for an extensive discussion on economic impacts of events). Additionally, Iowa has a long historical involvement with fairs due to the state's connection to agriculture. The methodology we used constitutes a benchmark approach that can be used elsewhere in Extension: conducting a needs assessment of appropriate managers, presenting needs-based workshops, and creating a resource that can be used by Extension offices and industry practitioners. On the basis of our findings, we are able to provide several suggestions for Extension educators interested in reaching rural FFE managers:

- A needs assessment can be an effective tool for understanding an existing knowledge gap faced by industry managers. Creating a workshop addressing all 140 items pertaining to FFE education and training competency standards would be impractical. Instead, using a needs assessment to directly ask managers to identify existing gaps in knowledge related to managing an FFE results in information from which a workshop and resource can be created.

- When delivering workshops about FFEs, it is important to remember that there will be a wide variety of workshop participants. For example, our workshops included executive managers of fairs, corporate meeting planners, convention and visitors bureau employees, and Extension staff. Participants also had a wide range of experience, spanning from beginner ventures into event planning to decades of experience with multiple FFEs.

- Evaluation of participants' understanding of material can be an effective way to gauge learning. The inclusion of a pretest and posttest test in our workshops allowed us to measure learning in the areas of awareness of existing regulations, managing crises and controversies, arranging security, developing cross-promotional activities, and developing media relations.

- Given the importance of FFEs to rural economies, Extension should position itself to provide education on managing FFEs in a variety of formats, including through workshops, published resources, and other methods.

FFE educational programs should continue to be an element of Extension. Future research into our workshop participants' implementation of concepts learned during the training is warranted. Additionally, a longitudinal study examining changes in education and training needs of rural Iowa FFE managers and operators should be conducted. Extension also could act as a catalyst for the implementation of diverse and accessible approaches to FFE education and training, such as video conferencing, virtual training, and other methods.

Acknowledgment

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