

A Framework for Developing Multiyear Conferences on Current Societal Issues

Abstract

This article describes how Extension professionals and university faculty collaborated on the planning, implementation, and evaluation of a conference to address a key societal issue. Needs assessment and evaluation results are presented as well as an explanation of how results were used in planning future conferences. With limited Extension budgets and personnel, partnering among Extension specialists, university faculty, and experts in relevant topics is a valuable and efficient way to provide the most impact for a community. Developing multiyear conferences to address significant societal issues may be a new way to increase Extension's impact.

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Introduction

Providing ongoing information relevant to professionals in communities is important to the mission of Extension family and consumer sciences programming. One way to deliver such information is to hold recurrent events, such as multiyear conferences, for targeted participants. As members of a team involved in planning, implementing, and evaluating the multiyear Rocky Mountain Conference on Aging (RMCoA), we present herein a framework for developing this type of conference.

Our team of Extension agents from four counties and faculty members from two universities created the RMCoA to provide relevant strategies and tools to professional, business, and community agency personnel who work with older adults and their families. The positive results of the first RMCoA motivated continuation of the conference for 6 subsequent years. The framework used in establishing this successful conference involved topic selection and preconference needs assessment, funding procurement, speaker selection, marketing, establishment of a conference program, and postconference evaluation.

Topic Selection and Preconference Needs Assessment

We selected a topic for the initial RMCoA through attention to a current societal issue. Specifically, our focus grew out of observations from the field and explorations of literature suggesting that the topic of older adults in the workplace was a current and relevant issue.

We designed and distributed an anonymous questionnaire that assessed interest in attending a conference about older workers and asked what potential attendees would like to learn. The two-page paper survey, designed to be completed in 10 min or less, was distributed by our team members in person or through email to managers, employers, human resources personnel, and other knowledgeable informants in the region. At the time, widespread use of online surveys was not as extensive as it is today.

On the basis of themes identified through our community observations, literature review, and analysis of our needs assessment results, we established objectives for the conference. Attendees would

- learn about current research and trends related to the impact of older workers,
- learn strategies for maximizing older workers as valuable resources, and
- understand workplace environments that support older workers.

Funding, Speaker Selection, Marketing, and Conference Program

Funding came from multiple sources. We obtained \$7,500 through an Extension Venture Capital Fund grant. In addition, we established a registration fee for attendees to help cover the cost of keynote speakers, marketing, refreshments, and materials and to provide sustainability for future conferences. Paid sponsors received exhibitor space and one conference registration. Low-cost general exhibitor spaces differentiated in price between for-profit and nonprofit organizations.

Planning included speaker selection and marketing efforts. Potential speakers were invited to submit proposals, and presentations were selected on the basis of importance, relevance, methodology, and usefulness. We partnered with a local human resources association to offer Human Resources Certification Institute continuing education units. A business graduate student intern assisted with marketing, and professional marketers at the conference venue provided additional guidance. Marketing efforts included an email blast, flyers, postcards, radio spots, announcements at meetings, and use of a website to announce the conference and provide links to session and registration information.

The conference was a 2-day event. The first day began with a keynote speaker, and each day consisted of concurrent sessions, lunch, breaks, and concluding sessions. Attendees came from four states in the region and included employers in various sectors, including job services, temporary worker agencies, senior work programs,

and services for aging persons; human resources professionals; leaders of faith communities; and representatives of agencies that rely on senior volunteers or older workers.

First-Year Postconference Evaluation

Attendees were asked to complete a short written evaluation at the end of the last day they attended the conference. The evaluation addressed marketing efforts, speakers and their presentations, knowledge gained, intentions regarding using the information provided, and suggestions for future conferences. Our team also held an informal on-the-spot debriefing at the conference site at the end of the second day, thereby creating a record of what we each had observed throughout the event. This record proved invaluable for planning in subsequent years with regard to attendee interest in topics and vendor exhibits as well as scheduling of sessions and breaks, parking, refreshments, timing, and room arrangements. Several months after the conference, we conducted a focus group session with agency providers, students, and other attendees. The session was led by a skilled facilitator, as recommended (Allen, Grudens-Schuck, & Larson, 2004; Culp, Edwards, & Jordan, 2015). The session provided information on what attendees found useful and how they were using what they had learned.

Data from the written evaluation, debriefing, and focus group session were used as a basis for determining the agenda for the second conference. Data on how attendees used or planned to use what they had learned were valuable for gauging conference impact.

Lessons Learned

As noted, we applied lessons learned the first year to subsequent iterations of the conference. Those lessons were as follows:

- The conference was reduced to 1 day.
- More general sessions attended by all participants were held.
- For the concurrent sessions, topics of the most interest were repeated.
- Presenters of the concurrent sessions were asked to limit time spent on reviewing general information as attendees had identified this practice as causing repetition across sessions. Additionally, the morning keynote speaker was asked to augment his or her presentation by covering general trends and facts, thereby giving all attendees a more comprehensive overview of the designated conference topic.
- The timing of the conference was changed from October to April to minimize the likelihood that inclement weather would affect individuals driving from farther distances.
- Evaluation cards were collected from attendees after each session and at the end of each conference day, and 6-month online follow-up surveys were used to determine how attendees had applied what they had learned.

The only attendee suggestion not used for future conferences was a recommendation to split the audience into managerial and human resources tracks. We learned that many members of our intended audience wore both hats in carrying out the responsibilities of their occupations; thus, having two tracks would have made it difficult for them to choose which track to participate in.

Implications for Extension Professionals

Several implications for Extension practice may be drawn from our experience.

- A preconference needs assessment benefits greatly from partnership between Extension and university personnel, allowing for outreach and planning within each area of expertise.
- The immediacy of conducting attendee evaluation during a conference enhances the ability to make adjustments for future conferences (e.g., Franz, Munsell, Brown, & Chittum, 2017).
- Including space for written comments on evaluations allows for gathering of information that would not be obtained otherwise.
- Debriefing immediately following the conference results in detailed notes that are valuable for future planning.
- Follow-up evaluation at a point in time after the conference provides attendees with the opportunity to implement what they learn and report on their actions.

With limited Extension budgets and personnel, partnering among Extension specialists, university faculty, and experts in relevant topics is a valuable and efficient way to provide the most impact for a community. Developing multiyear conferences to address significant societal issues may be a new opportunity for Extension to increase its impact.

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