# Overview of a Statewide Extension Strategic Planning Process and Unintended Outcomes

**Abstract**

In 2010, University of Tennessee Extension conducted a strategic planning effort focused on the subsequent 10 years. The process involved approximately 3,000 Tennesseans in online surveys, area meetings, opinion polling, and focus group sessions. This article describes the process, tools, and outcomes—which included a comprehensive strategic plan. Yet the strategic planning process itself produced unintended outcomes, specifically professional development opportunities, greater awareness of Extension among state government stakeholders, and continuity in the pursuit of strategic goals despite administrative change. The major implication for Cooperative Extension organizations is that attention to the potential of these unintended outcomes can enhance strategic planning.

**Keywords:** strategic planning, leadership, PERT charts, organizational change

**Joseph L. Donaldson**
Assistant Professor
Department of 4-H
Youth Development
and Agricultural
Leadership, Education,
and Communications
joseph_donaldson@ncsu.edu
@Joseph_GoPack

**Shirley Hastings**
Professor, Extension
Administration
hastings@tennessee.edu

University of
Tennessee
Knoxville, Tennessee

## Introduction

"Over the last 25 years, strategic planning has become a ubiquitous practice in U.S. governments and non-profit organizations" (Bryson, 2010, p. S255)

Strategic planning yields a multitude of benefits in the context of nonprofit organizations; these include clarifying among leaders and clients the outcomes produced by the organization and infusing perspectives of major stakeholders into the work of the organization (McHatton, Bradshaw, Gallagher, & Reeves, 2011). Bryson (2010) found numerous case studies demonstrating the value of strategic planning to government agencies and nonprofit organizations. Boleman and Cummings (2005) posited a strategic planning model for Cooperative Extension that featured county and state forums in which key stakeholders discussed, through a nominal group technique, relevant issues for Cooperative Extension to address.

In 2010, University of Tennessee (UT) Extension launched a strategic planning process to address new needs and opportunities while continuing to provide solutions for local issues. The challenge UT Extension

faced was described by Collins (2009) in *How the Mighty Fall . . . And Why Some Companies Never Give In*:

> Enduring great organizations are characterized by a fundamental duality. On the one hand, they have a set of timeless core values and core reason for being that remain constant over long periods of time. On the other hand, they have a relentless drive for change and progress. (p. 182)

In Tennessee, as in other parts of the country, shifts in funding, economic decline, a smaller workforce, changing demographics, and advancing technology created challenges that had to be addressed for Extension to remain relevant and viable. Now reflecting on and documenting the accomplishments resulting from the strategic plan over the past 10 years, we have found that the strategic planning process itself produced unintended positive outcomes for the Extension organization. In this article, we describe the strategic planning process, including the tools employed and overall project time line, to provide both context and potential approaches for a strategic planning effort. This description lays the foundation for our focus: the unintended outcomes of that process, which were greater professional development in needs assessment and planning, awareness of Extension among state government stakeholders, and continuity in strategic plan implementation despite a turnover of key state administrators. We end with a discussion of implications, with the most prominent implication being that Extension professionals may shape strategic planning efforts to take advantage of the unintended outcomes we identified.

## Overall Process

The strategic planning process was conducted by 22 employees who comprised the Strategic Planning Leadership Team (referred to hereafter as the Leadership Team). This group, of which we were members, collected and analyzed data to inform the strategic plan. We sought opinions from many Tennesseans, including UT Extension and Tennessee State University Cooperative Extension employees, decision makers, clientele, partners, and volunteers. The goal was to involve as many people as possible to identify issues affecting Tennessee residents in local communities (consistent with recommendations from Boleman & Cummings, 2005). The overall project time line is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.**

Overall Project Time Line

| Time period | Responsible party | Task(s) |
|---|---|---|
| Month 1 | UT Extension Administration[a] | Establish Leadership Team |
| Month 2 | Leadership Team | Conduct Leadership Team retreat Develop overall time line Plan ways to involve employees and citizens Identify key values and stakeholders Draft meeting and survey questions |
| Month 3 | Leadership Team | Launch strategic planning website[b] and online surveys Administer employee survey to all Extension employees Administer general public survey to group of key stakeholders (clients and program partners) Summarize key ideas for use in area meetings |
| Month 4 | Leadership | Conduct strategic planning area meetings, a series of 10 meetings held across |

|  |  |  |
|---|---|---|
|  | Team | the state, engaging all Extension personnel (internal) and five stakeholders per county (external) |
| Month 5 | Leadership Team | Analyze and digest findings from meetings and surveys, define a clear vision, and articulate goals and strategies Receive research reports on strategic areas such as budgeting |
| Month 6 | Leadership Team | Post strategic plan draft on strategic planning website with online suggestion box for feedback from general public |
| Month 7 | Leadership Team | Conduct focus group sessions with statewide leaders |
| Month 8 | Leadership Team | Conduct Leadership Team retreat Consider findings from online suggestion box and focus group sessions Revise strategic plan in response to findings Draft preliminary action steps |
| Month 9 | Leadership Team | Introduce strategic plan at state Extension conference |
|  | UT Extension Administration | Produce PERT (program evaluation and review technique) charts to guide implementation |

aUniversity of Tennessee (UT) Extension Administration was composed of the dean, the director of Extension evaluation and staff development, the assistant dean for agriculture and natural resources, the assistant dean for family and consumer sciences, the chief business officer, and the state 4-H program leader. bThe strategic planning website was used for sharing information about the strategic planning process, including summarized data from meetings, surveys, online suggestion box, and focus group sessions.

# Online Surveys

## *Employee Online Survey*

The employee survey asked about organizational successes, job satisfaction, staffing, prioritizing of programs and methods, marketing, and organizational values. The questionnaire was validated for face and content validity by members of the Leadership Team. Example questions are as follows:

- What Extension educational programs do you anticipate will have the highest priority in the next 10 years?

- Please name one or two criteria that should be used to determine staffing allocations.

- What is one UT Extension rule/policy that is a barrier to performing your job?

Of the 650 employees, 413 completed surveys, for a 63% response rate. The results were analyzed for themes, and the most frequent responses (themes) were listed on a summary fact sheet that was posted on the strategic plan website.

## *General Public Online Survey*

Engaging clients in a needs assessment process is a necessity for organizations to remain relevant (Boleman & Cummings, 2006). An online questionnaire was available to every person contacted by UT Extension personnel in July and August 2010. The overall aim of the study was to understand UT Extension stakeholders' needs and viewpoints relative to strategic issues. Example questions are as follows:

- What UT Extension programs provide the greatest benefit to your community?

- What is ONE thing you would like to change about UT Extension?

- Think about social, political, and economic changes or trends in your community. What is the ONE most important change or trend that will affect your community over the next 10 years?

For 4 weeks, invitations to complete the questionnaire were extended to every person contacted by Extension (see Figure 1). This included but was not limited to every person who attended an Extension meeting, visited an Extension office, received an on-site visit from Extension, or received an Extension newsletter (whether email or paper). An invitation to the survey was also posted on the UT Extension website. Usable questionnaires were submitted by 1,596 individuals of the 2,508 who accessed the questionnaire, for a response rate of 63.6%.

**Figure 1.**

Online Invitation for General Public Survey
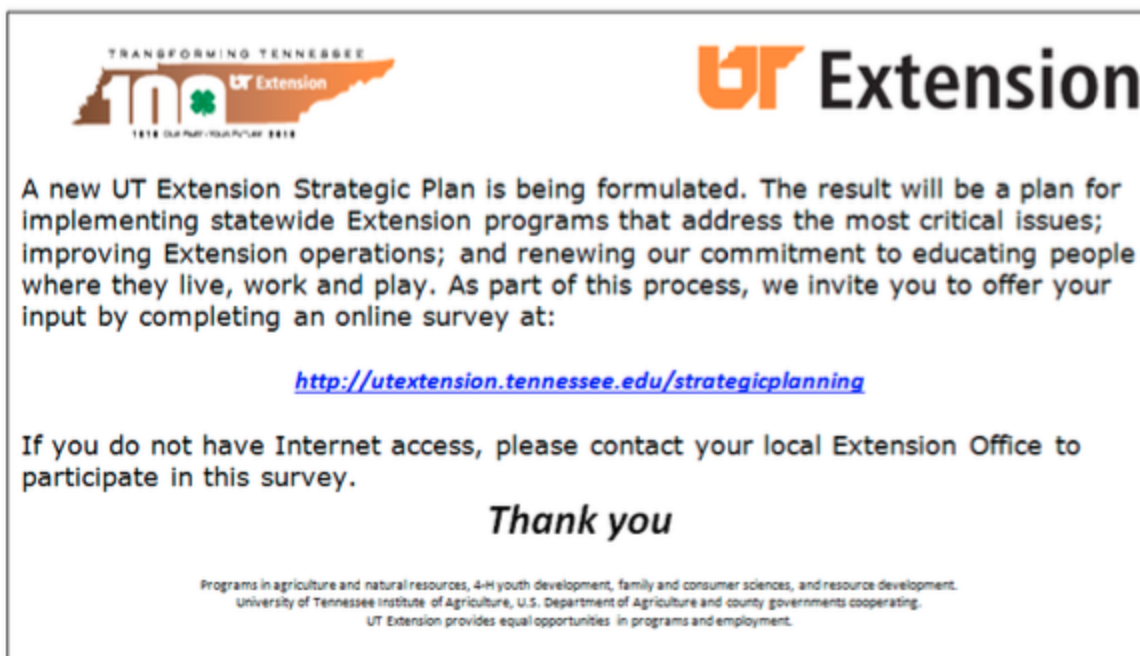


## Area Meetings

Leadership Team members held 10 area meetings at various locations across the state that were attended by 902 Extension employees and invited external stakeholders. All Extension employees were invited to

attend an area meeting, with approximately 10 to 12 counties participating per meeting. One meeting was held on the UT campus to accommodate faculty and staff assigned to departments and centers on campus. County personnel were asked to select five stakeholders to represent each of their respective counties at the area meetings.

After Leadership Team members presented an overview of the strategic planning process, the employees and stakeholders met in separate rooms. We used this format to facilitate open and honest discussions on the part of both employees and stakeholders. We conducted opinion polling using an audience response system ("clickers"), displayed real-time results of each polling question, and used follow-up discussions as a way to "debrief" the polling results. Example questions are as follows:

- What do you consider the most effective method for Extension nutrition/obesity prevention programs over the next 10 years?

  - Group meetings

  - One-on-one consultations

  - Web-based: social media

  - Web-based: other

  - No opinion

- What is the most important trend to address in the UT Extension Strategic Plan?

  - Cuts to federal/state/county budgets

  - Economic downturn

  - Fewer farms/fewer farm families

  - Increased population

  - Technology/social media

  - Urbanization

  - No opinion

## Focus Group Sessions

To maintain and strengthen partnerships with individuals, agencies, and organizations across the state, we conducted focus group sessions with 24 state-level stakeholders. These individuals represented either statewide voluntary organizations (e.g., the executive director of a statewide environmental action group)

or departments of state government (e.g., the commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Human Services). Three focus group sessions with eight stakeholders per group were held at a central location, and the same protocol was used for all sessions.

The session protocol included a brief summary of the draft strategic plan, followed by facilitated focus group questions to allow participants to share their opinions about the plan. All participants were provided hard copies of the draft plan for their reference and discussion. The sessions took approximately 2 hr, and each session included a moderator and a note taker whose role was to accurately record opinions. All comments and feedback were confidential. This process was helpful for understanding how key issues were complex and interrelated (Guion, 2009).

## Retreats

In Months 2 and 8 of the strategic planning process, we used 2-day and 3-day Leadership Team retreats. In Month 2, we used the retreat to develop an overall time line, plan ways to involve employees and citizens, identify key values and stakeholders, and draft questions for meetings and surveys. In Month 8, we used the retreat to consider findings from the online suggestion box and focus group sessions, revise the draft strategic plan in response to findings, and draft preliminary action steps. In Month 8, three doctoral candidates who were completing studies of the Tennessee Extension workforce presented their research to the Leadership Team. The three studies were in the areas of county-level leadership, performance appraisal, and work–life balance. We triangulated the data from these studies with the existing data collected for the strategic plan to add weight and validity to the findings. For example, the need for a stronger county director training system was identified in all the doctoral candidates' studies and the various strategic plan data collections. In Month 2, Leadership Team members selected one of four books to read and discuss with a subgroup of at least four other team members, and in Month 8, those subgroups shared book reports with the entire Leadership Team to build the team's capacity for contemporary thought in strategic planning and organizational change. The four books were as follows:

- *Leading Change*, by J. P. Kotter, 1996, Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business School Press.

- *Blue Ocean Strategy: How to Create Uncontested Market Space and Make the Competition Irrelevant*, by W. C. Kim and R. Mauborgne, 2005, Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business School Press.

- *A Sense of Urgency*, by J. P. Kotter, 2008, Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business School Press.

- *How the Mighty Fall . . . and Why Some Companies Never Give In*, by J. Collins, 2009, New York, New York: Harper Collins.

## Program Evaluation and Review Technique

After the 9-month strategic planning process, the state Extension administrators used the strategic plan to produce program evaluation and review technique (PERT) charts detailing implementation specifics such as start dates, end dates, and coordination across different initiatives in the strategic plan. PERT charts have had a long history as a project management and organizational development tool. PERT was originally developed by U.S. Navy Polaris project personnel and has been used extensively by NASA (Sylvia & Sylvia,

2012). PERT charts have been used in Extension, and M. Smith (1981) suggested using PERT charts for Extension funding proposals to federal agencies. The major benefit of the technique is that it facilitates identifying relationships between activities for determining tasks that can be performed in parallel. Steps in using PERT are as follows:

- identify the specific activities and milestones,

- determine sequence,

- construct a network diagram,

- estimate time required for each activity,

- determine critical path, and

- update the PERT chart as the project progresses (Sylvia & Sylvia, 2012).

PERT provides a clear delineation of a project completion time, including specific start and end dates for all tasks (see Figure 2), although one weakness of the method is the subjective nature of a "time" estimate. PERT charts may demonstrate both the probability of early completion and the most critical path for completion of the overall initiative. PERT improves implementation of a plan by revealing activities that have slack time and resources that can be redirected. PERT has the potential to reduce time and cost in addition to being an effective communication tool (Sylvia & Sylvia, 2012). For a practical, Extension-focused example of this technique, Figure 3 shows our PERT chart for improving communication with elected officials.
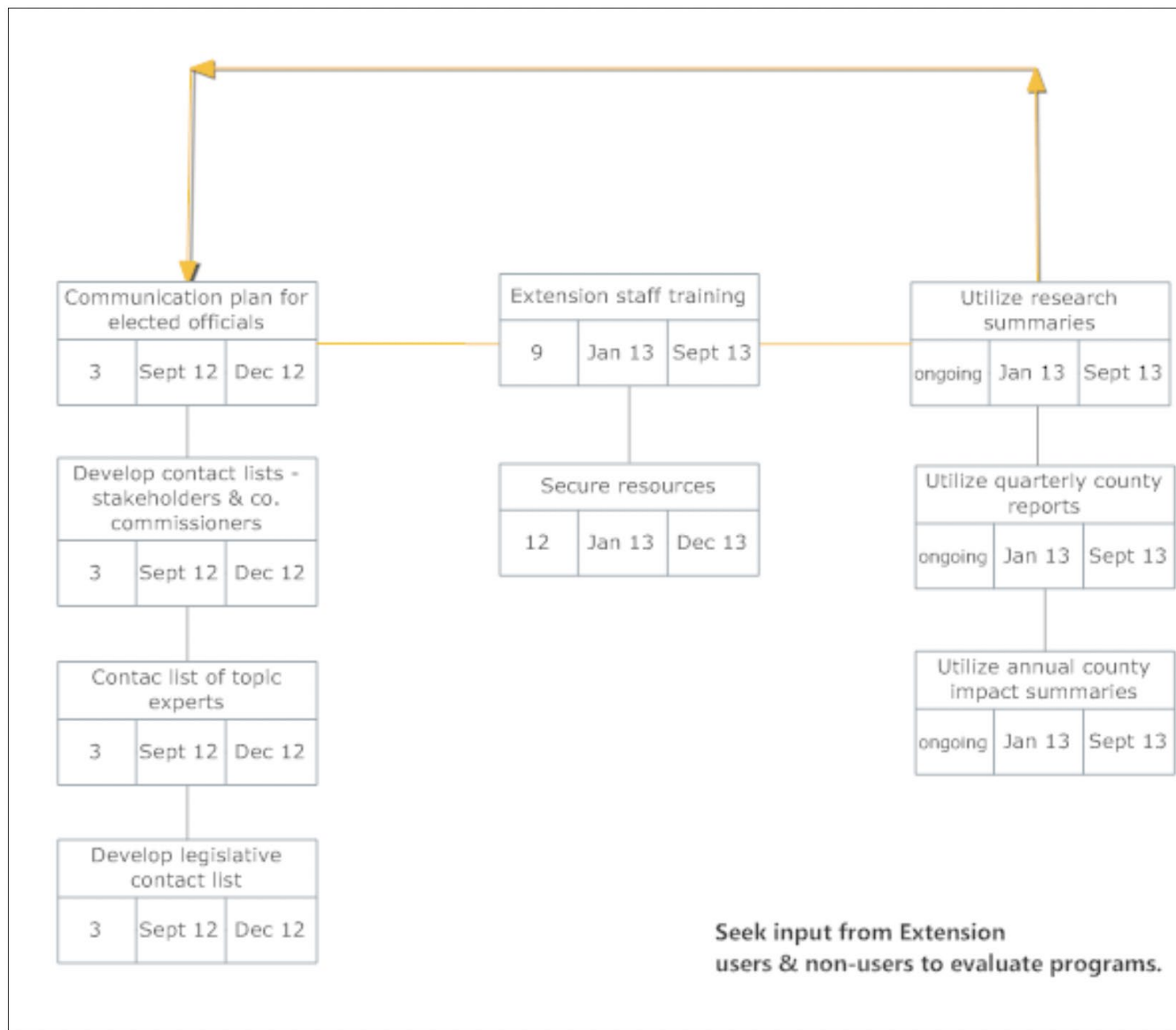
**Figure 2.**
PERT (Program Evaluation and Review Technique) Task Template

**Figure 3.**

Example PERT (Program Evaluation and Review Technique) Chart for Improving Communication with Elected Officials



# Unintended Outcomes

As was expected, the strategic planning effort contributed to organizational development, including via a training and mentoring program for county Extension marketing (Sneed, Hastings Elizer, Hastings, & Barry, 2016), an employee wellness program (Donaldson, Bell, Toman, & Hastings, 2016), and a streamlined performance appraisal system (Donaldson, 2019). The effort also created other benefits to the organization, including greater capacity among Extension professionals to pursue organizational change. Similar benefits have been described across a range of nonprofit and governmental organizations by K. L. Smith and Torppa (2010), McHatton et al. (2011), and Bryson (2010). The major implication for the broader Cooperative Extension System shown by the Tennessee experience, however, is that the strategic planning process itself can produce unintended outcomes. In the case of our experience, these outcomes were associated with

employee professional development, interest in and awareness of Extension, and continuity despite significant administrative change.

## Professional Development

As with most extensive planning efforts, the process provided much "food for thought." Anecdotally, Extension professionals conveyed to us that although all the data collected were valuable, the focus group results and area meeting discussions connected with emotions, attitudes, and perspectives in ways that cannot be achieved with surveys. In response, author Joseph Donaldson, of our author team, and a colleague—both Extension specialists with expertise in program planning and evaluation—developed a new publication, *Needs Assessment Guidebook for Extension Professionals* (Donaldson & Franck, 2016). This tool highlights how to organize, conduct, and analyze focus group research for needs assessment purposes as well as implement other techniques, such as individual interviews, future wheels, and document reviews, that contribute to effective needs assessment. This tool became a key resource for Situational Analysis: Strengths-Based Approaches for Conducting Needs Assessments, a 1-day in-service attended by 101 Extension professionals. Likewise, numerous Extension personnel informally asked us how to use audience response systems for ongoing Extension program planning and for Extension educational programs. To address this piqued interest, we organized an in-service training, Using Clickers for Extension Education, which was attended by 35 Extension professionals. Although not mentioned specifically in the strategic plan itself, the in-service trainings in these key areas were unintended outcomes of the process.

## Interest and Awareness

The strategic planning process created greater interest in and awareness of Extension among stakeholders at the community, university, and state government levels due to the area meetings and focus group sessions. Looking back, the area meetings and focus group sessions successfully created an esprit de corps regarding UT Extension and its future. The focus group sessions were particularly helpful in raising interest and awareness among leaders of statewide organizations and state government departments. In fact, they were motivated to ask, "What can we do for Extension?" Our typical answer was to tell them to inform others about the strategic planning process and direct them to our offices and website. In hindsight, a more specific answer about securing funding or serving on advisory committees would have been more helpful to the Extension organization. Despite being highly organized (e.g., through the use of PERT charts), we were unprepared for this increased interest among government and state leaders.

## Continuity

We did not foresee that in the ensuing 10 years, the turnover ratio for UT Extension administration would be 83% (turnover in five of six positions). One might expect such a high turnover ratio to be detrimental to a strategic plan. Yet the PERT charts were useful to administrators in tracking what had been accomplished and detailing next steps. Therefore, the PERT charts contributed to continuity in strategic plan implementation, underscoring the strength of the technique as a communication tool (Sylvia & Sylvia, 2012). The strategic plan and the accompanying PERT charts created a North Star for the administrative team and helped them set and carry on with organizational priorities (Reichenbach & Simon-Brown, 2002).

# Implications for Extension

The strategic plan included five overarching goals with action steps. Broadly stated, the goals were expanding Extension partnerships, funding, and infrastructure; delivering programs to address the greatest needs of Tennessee families, farmers, youths, and communities; attracting and retaining a diverse and highly qualified workforce; operating efficiently and effectively at all levels; and increasing visibility of the organization among the public. (The completed plan is available at https://extension.tennessee.edu/StrategicPlan/Pages/StrategicPlan.aspx.) The realization that the strategic planning process itself produces outcomes and accompanying attention to these outcomes at the beginning of a strategic planning effort could help Extension organizations enhance their organizational effectiveness.

The area meeting questions (e.g., "What do you consider the most effective method for Extension nutrition/obesity prevention programs over the next 10 years?") were of a type that elicited the experiences of the participants. The life experiences of adults are critically important to their development. Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2015) conceptualized the role of life experiences in adult learning by explaining that "the richest resources for learning reside in the adult learners themselves" (p. 45). The area meetings provided experiential learning, specifically responding to questions using an audience response system and participating in group discussion.

We found that the PERT technique led to continuity in achieving the strategic plan goals despite unanticipated organizational change, most notably administrative turnover. The strategic planning process was a kind of pile driver for new professional development opportunities. Cooperative Extension organizations undergoing similar planning efforts should consider that a successful planning effort should promote strategic thinking and actions among employees and stakeholders (Bryson, 2010).

A limitation of the UT Extension strategic planning effort was lack of a process evaluation. A process evaluation records program activities and the extent to which they are implemented according to plan (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017). Process evaluations address inputs, activities, participation, and reactions (Radhakrishna & Bowen, 2010). Ideally, a strategic planning process evaluation should be led by an external evaluator who can take an unbiased view of the organization and its planning effort. Extension organizations pursuing strategic planning efforts should consider process evaluations to identify effective approaches, pitfalls, and accomplishments to inform and strengthen future planning efforts.

### Author Note

Joseph L. Donaldson is currently an assistant professor and Extension specialist in the Department of Agricultural and Human Sciences at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, North Carolina.

# References

Boleman, C. T., & Cummings, S. R. (2005). Listening to the people: A strategic planning model for Cooperative Extension. *Journal of Extension*, *43*(3), Article 3TOT3. Available at: http://www.joe.org/joe/2005june/tt3.php

Boleman, C. T., & Cummings, S. R. (2006). We identified issues through stakeholder input—Now what? *Journal of Extension*, *44*(1), Article 1TOT1. Available at: http://www.joe.org/joe/2006february/tt1.php

Bryson, J. M. (2010). The future of public and nonprofit strategic planning in the United States. *Public Administration Review*, *70*(1), S255–S267. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2010.02285.x

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2017). Types of evaluation. Retrieved from https://www.cdc.gov/std/Program/pupestd/Types%20of%20Evaluation.pdf

Collins, J. (2009). *How the mighty fall . . . and why some companies never give in*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.

Donaldson, J. L. (2019). Tools for a statewide performance appraisal system for Extension professionals. *Journal of Extension*, *57*(6), Article v57-6tt1. Available at: https://joe.org/joe/2019december/tt1.php

Donaldson, J. L., Bell, B. A., Toman, J. J., & Hastings, S. (2016). Marathon month promotes healthful lifestyles for Extension employees. *Journal of Extension*, *54*(5), Article v54-5iw4. Available at: https://www.joe.org/joe/2016october/iw4.php

Donaldson, J. L., & Franck, K. L. (2016). *Needs assessment guidebook for Extension professionals* (UT Extension publication PB1839). Retrieved from https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/PB1839.pdf

Guion, L. A. (2009). A tool for focusing integrated team efforts on complex issues. *Journal of Extension*, *47*(1), Article v47-1tt2. Available at: http://www.joe.org/joe/2009february/tt2.php

Knowles, M. S., Holton, E. F., III, & Swanson, R. A. (2015). *The adult learner* (8th ed.). London, England: Routledge Press.

McHatton, P. A., Bradshaw, W., Gallagher, P. A., & Reeves, R. (2011). Results from a strategic planning process: Benefits for a nonprofit organization. *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, *22*(2), 233–249.

Radhakrishna, R., & Bowen, C. F. (2010). Viewing Bennett's hierarchy from a different lens: Implications for Extension program evaluation. *Journal of Extension*, *48*(6), Article v48-6tt1. Available at: https://www.joe.org/joe/2010december/tt1.php

Reichenbach, M., & Simon-Brown, V. (2002). Linking strategic thinking and project planning: The Oregon State University Extension forestry experience. *Journal of Extension*, *40*(4), Article 4IAW1. Available at: https://www.joe.org/joe/2002august/iw1.php

Smith, K. L., & Torppa, C. B. (2010). Creating the capacity for organizational change: Personnel participation and receptivity to change. *Journal of Extension*, *48*(4), Article v48-4a1. Available at: http://www.joe.org/joe/2010august/a1.php

Smith, M. (1981). Graphics for brevity and understanding. *Journal of Extension*, *19*(4). Available at: http://www.joe.org/joe/1981july/81-4-a1.pdf

Sneed, C. T., Hastings Elizer, A., Hastings, S., & Barry, M. (2016). Developing a marketing mind-set: Training and mentoring for county Extension employees. *Journal of Extension*, *54*(4), Article v54-4iw2. Available at: https://www.joe.org/joe/2016august/iw2.php

Sylvia, R. D., & Sylvia, K. M. (2012). *Program planning and evaluation for the public manager* (4th ed.). Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.