

We Are Not Your Father's Extension System!

INTRODUCTION

On occasion we hear, the Cooperative Extension System used to do (you fill in the blank) and they no longer do! We all mourn the loss of what was but at the same time we expect life and organizations with which we are involved to move forward, addressing current and future needs. No, the Cooperative Extension System is not what it was 20 or more years ago. Now we are more engaged with the people of the state than ever before.

In April's e-forum, Michael Newman did an excellent job of discussing the importance of measuring outcomes and impacts. How do we graphically represent our programs and then how do we examine what is reasonable, feasible, ethical and appropriate?

This month I will explore the program development and evaluation process from the program participant's perspective. For this example, I will use the agricultural producer but the example works equally well for natural resources, youth and/or family programs. How do we actively engage the farmer in the applied research and education process?

Our historical vision of Extension was helping people put knowledge to work or delivering the resources of the university to the people of the state. Today, people in the state work as active partners with the university to address current issues. As an organization of the past, we prided ourselves on being the "expert" focused on solving the local problem. Our state specialists were housed at the university and trained the local county agent to answer questions. As a local county agent for a number of years, I must confess I became increasingly troubled by my answer to callers' questions. I never doubted that I presented research-based answers. What troubled me was that I was using my value system to answer the question. This was usually done without asking the caller what was important or without giving alternatives for callers to make the decision. As the educator, I was in control of what information I allowed to flow to callers.

AN EXAMPLE

Building partnerships to address issues and problems engages the community in identifying what are often ill-defined problems. Let's look at an example. What if the issue is access to locally produced fresh vegetables, what is the real problem? Possible problems might be insufficient produce brought to market or high land prices near urban areas, or insufficient customer base to purchase the produce, or (add your ideas here) and the list goes on. The problem will vary with the location and the specific circumstances.

Once the problem is defined, what are the possible solutions? What solution would work best in a community? In a region? And, how will the process be evaluated to know what is

working? What will be the criteria for evaluation? And, how might we better engage the learner and educator in the program development process?

Engaging the producer in identifying problems is more involved than just asking stakeholders what Extension should focus on for the future. Heimlich and Norland (1994) illustrate engagement through their Teaching-Learning Exchange Model. In this model, the educator and the learner come together for the exchange of information, problems, and alternatives. This interconnected exchange model evolves into a learning community with no pretense of who is in control. Brookfield identified learning communities as groups of individuals that share a common bond and are formed for the purpose of learning. An example of such a learning community is the recently formed Connecticut Manure Cooperative.

DEVELOPING LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Yes, the Cooperative Extension System is still in the business of education and outreach to the state. Instead of just reaching, we are asking learners to engage with us. Learners must come to the table as an equal to the educators, bringing their areas of interest or need, their expertise as an individual, an organization, or a business. Educators and learners must work together to find the best answer for the current situation. Notice I did not say the “right” answer. We may never be able to identify the “right” answer, but we should take the risk of selecting the best answer from what we know now. Together, we can implement that answer or we can work together to research other alternatives.

A farmer may want to evaluate the best plants to grow around the manure storage pit to reduce odors. Specific questions arise:

- ◆ Is there a plant that will best reduce odors, and thus reduce the number of neighbor complaints, allowing the farmer to continue in business?
- ◆ Would a farmer (learner) be willing to engage the knowledge of the university with her personal knowledge and expertise about the farmstead to jointly plan and conduct a research project on the farm? This concept of farmer-led research changes the traditional relationship between producers and the university. Farmers are now on equal footing with the university in solving the problem, thus creating a learning community.

The Extension System of old was often criticized for working mainly with industrial agriculture or only being interested in large farms. At times, research and extension programs were done in a vacuum without input from the intended audience. Engagement of the university with the producer requires a change in mindset for both the university and producers. This change in mindset allows research ideas to be generated by the producer, who then works with the university to design, implement, and evaluate the research project on the farm. The producer assumes ownership of the idea and is involved in the design and implementation of the research. The concept of engagement moves the Extension System from a top down model to an ecosystem learning community approach.

LEARNING COMMUNITIES AS ECOSYSTEMS

Each one of us is at the center of our own personal ecosystem. Ecosystems are different for university people and for producers. The university people have their professional and family

ecosystems and the producers have their farm and family ecosystems. We each explore these ecosystems to meet our basic needs for food, shelter and love. As we do so, we seek information from those around us that support and foster our ideas and resolves our problems. We desire information that fits our own ecosystem.

The Extension System may or may not provide information that fits a producer's ecosystem. How do we know if we are meeting those needs? Will a stakeholder assessment of program needs identify the same type of needs as farmer led research in a learning community system would? I think not. A stakeholder assessment might only bring to the surface, larger issues as opposed to the learning community idea of focusing on the concerns of a specific ecosystem.

If learning is to occur, the university must engage with the producer's ecosystem rather than create one of their own. To meet producers' needs, Extension must provide research-based information, not in a vacuum, but in a format that producers can use or challenge, or build upon for their own research efforts. How will we answer the conservation-related questions of excessive nutrients from manure? Shall we build more storage pits? Or shall we engage the producers in farmer led research efforts for them to test ideas for ways to disperse nutrients over a larger area outside of direct contact with a watershed?

In today's information based society, the Cooperative Extension System does not have the total complement of answers. What we bring to the table are the informational resources of the university and a mindset of developing learning communities to empower people to make their own decisions based on the needs of their ecosystem. We come as a partner to the people of the state to further economic development, to enhance ecological sustainability, and to ultimately enhance the quality of life for all.

To build on Michael Newman's article on measuring outcomes and impacts, I would suggest that farmer-led research build goals for the research group. Educators assist farmers in measuring progress and provide feedback to guide thinking and practice. Producers form research teams based on common interests that include opportunities for guided instruction, deliberate practices, and active experimentation.

Farmer led research groups are developing best management practices by farmers identifying the research topic and educators providing the technical information to ensure statistically sound results. *This model is a collaborative process based on science and the farmers' intimate knowledge of their ecosystems.* The long-term implication is that the best management practices are more likely to be adopted by farmers as compared to those developed at a research station.

SUMMARY

Engagement in participatory education is not the same as having all the answers or even having the "right" answer. We must further the concept of critical learning communities by bringing our expertise in science and evaluation to farmer led research projects that enable answers to the difficult questions being asked.

If Extension is not developing learning communities then we need to be challenged to do so! Through the collaboration created by critical learning communities, we will all be strengthened.

For further information on the farmer led research efforts in Connecticut, please contact Tom Morris, Associate Professor, Plant Science (thomas.morris@uconn.edu) or Barry Sheckley, Professor, Adult Learning, Neag School of Education (barry.sheckley@uconn.edu).

Reference

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