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IFAS Extension

Determining Program Priorities[1]

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Determining program priorities is one of the most critical aspects of working in Cooperative Extension. It is no secret that many needs exist in our local communities, and there is no shortage of demand for Extension's services. An agent can quickly become overwhelmed with requests for programs and can become overextended by attempting to do more than what is feasible with the resources available (Diem, 2002). Fortunately, it is possible to be systematic about which needs are addressed by educational programs and which are best left alone. This EDIS publication provides some ideas for sorting and prioritizing needs.

Step 1: Conducting a needs assessment.

Conducting a needs assessment is the first step in sorting and prioritizing needs. Needs assessments determine what needs exist in a community. Information on needs assessments can be found in previous EDIS publications by authors such as Bolton and Guion (2005); Gellerman, Lenfesty, and Brennan (2007); Guion (2003); and Israel and Galindo-Gonzalez (2008). Additional in-depth information can be found in the hallmark texts by Witkin and Altschuld (1995) entitled *Planning and Conducting Needs Assessments: A Practical Guide*,

and by Kaufman and English (1979) entitled *Needs Assessment: Concept and Application*. This publication begins with the assumption that a needs assessment has been completed and decisions must now be made regarding which needs to address.

Step 2: Discard nonprogramming needs.

Let us begin by identifying what is *not* a program priority. Educational programs are not the solution for every need. It is not uncommon for stakeholders to express legitimate needs that are more appropriately addressed through alternative means (e.g., policy changes, the purchase of equipment, or interpersonal conflict resolution) rather than educational programs (Caffarella, 2002). Examples include a desire for nicer physical facilities or more staff or agents. With this in mind, sort the county's identified needs into two categories: educational programming needs and alternative intervention needs. If unsure about how to categorize a need, Caffarella recommends placing it into the educational programming pile for further consideration.

Step 3: Refine the educational programming pile.

It may be helpful to ask a small group of colleagues, advisory council members, or other stakeholders to assist with this task. In this step, consider people, organizational and environmental factors, and cost (Caffarella, 2002). For each need, decide:

- Do people already have the knowledge or skills necessary to resolve the need, even if they have not chosen to apply them?

- Are the organizational climate and environment conducive to delivering an educational program to address the need?

- Will there be significant forces working against your programming efforts?

- Do the benefits of addressing the needs outweigh the costs?

If the answer to any of these questions is no, then it is likely that the need would be more appropriately addressed by an alternative intervention and should be dropped from consideration.

Step 4: Select people to help you determine program priorities.

Once the list of needs has been refined to only those with realistic potential, consider which needs should be addressed by educational programs. It can be tempting to determine program priorities on your own. Your years of experience, technical expertise, time savings, and previous solicitation of input can all appear to be valid reasons for skipping this step. *Don't do it*. When you make decisions by yourself, you rob yourself of an ideal opportunity to build support for your programs with opinion leaders—key community members and stakeholders who can help influence others' opinions in your favor (Rogers, 2003). Regardless of who you have worked with up to this point, be sure to include at least one opinion leader when you reach this step. Other people you may want to include are similar to those suggested in the third step (i.e., past, current, or potential participants; content experts; staff; volunteers;

supervisors; colleagues; stakeholders) (Caffarella, 2002). Ultimately, you will benefit from the credibility and expertise that a wisely selected screening panel can give to the decision-making process.

Step 5: Use a system to determine program priorities.

According to Caffarella (2002), "In selecting ideas for program development, planners should bear in mind that the more systematic the process, the greater likelihood that the resulting education and training activities will reflect the most important and feasible ideas" (p. 140). A variety of systems for determining program priorities exist, and there are advantages and disadvantages to each. Quantitative approaches can be more objective, but may limit the creativity of the process. Qualitative approaches allow participants to express a wide variety of viewpoints, but the use of words rather than numbers may make it more difficult to determine a clear-cut "winner." A quantitative system specifically designed for use in Cooperative Extension (Diem, 2002) has been chosen as an example for this publication.

Diem (2002) recommended using a questionnaire to collect input that can be used to determine the potential value of an Extension program. Use the group assembled in Step 4 to complete the questionnaire. A five-point Likert-type scale (1 = *highly questionable*, 5 = *definitely*) is used to rate criteria about the program. The following criteria are those suggested by Diem, but you may find you need fewer criteria to evaluate a potential program. Select only the criteria that make sense for your situation, and feel free to add criteria not included in the list.

1. Has high past or current attendance/enrollment.

2. Has high future attendance/enrollment potential (growth).

3. Is unique. (Number of similar available opportunities is limited, at least for target audience, and therefore does not duplicate other efforts.)

4. Has adequate funding and resources to be successful (or has the ability to attract them).

5. Projects favorable, contemporary image to general public.

6. Has potential for attracting nontraditional audiences.

7. Is of political importance (to grassroots level or formal political powers).

8. Directly addresses a critical societal issue, concern, or need.

9. Has base of support at land-grant university (available specialists or other faculty; available resources, research, and knowledge bases).

10. Provides opportunity for effective recruitment of ongoing program participants/volunteers.

11. Is consistent with Extension/program mission.

12. Has established purpose(s) and objective(s).

13. Provides worthwhile learning-by-doing experience.

14. Uses or promotes safe practices.

15. Complements other Extension programs offered and integrates well into total Extension program.

16. Conforms to moral standards of the community.

17. Is interesting or fun for participants.

18. Attracts favorable mass media attention.

19. Provides valuable skill(s).

20. Is not unnecessarily costly for participants.

21. Utilizes appropriate balance of paid staff and volunteer efforts.

22. Provides noncompetitive experiences.

23. Is a service to the community.

24. Is of educational value.

25. Results in positive impact.

Calculate the total score for each participant by summing the ratings of the selected criteria. Then use the total score from each participant to calculate a mean for the group. The resulting means for each potential program will help you objectively determine program priorities. Potential programs with the highest means should be addressed first, while lower-scoring programs should be placed on the metaphorical back burner or turned over to volunteers until conditions change (Diem, 2003). Use these results to work with your County Extension Director, District Extension Director, and/or Program Leader to determine how many programs you can *realistically* manage. Once these decisions have been made, you'll be ready to communicate the new program priorities to your stakeholders and get started program planning!

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