

## ACCOUNTABILITY OF EXTENSION EDUCATION IN THE GLOBAL ARENA

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### ABSTRACT

*Multiple facets of an accountability system are addressed. Demands by the public and users for extension program relevance is now required. The primary focus is on program impacts that have a positive influence on people's lives. Cost effectiveness and strategic planning for accountability is described as a must. Targeting audiences for accountability information with significant emphasis on using success stories for conveying program impacts is explained. Viable accountability systems are required for collecting and storing appropriate data. The development of an electronic reporting system is explained. Ultimately, a focus on the critical issues of appropriate client involvement in planning, implementing and evaluating extension programs must be combined with adequately planned and proactive accountability functions to assure that needed support for extension programs remains viable.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The dictionary uses the words "explainable" and "responsible" to describe accountability (Guralnik, 1976:9). Richardson & Knecht (1996) see accountability in multiple dimensions depending upon the focus. They defined *accountability* as 'taking responsibility for our actions and appropriately providing information on the results.' For *program accountability*, they see that function as 'providing appropriate information to the public, funding bodies, and others relating to accomplishment of intended program outcomes for which funding was granted.' Yet, for *organisational accountability*, they describe that function as 'appropriate responsiveness to funding entities and others for assuring that the mission of the organisation is sufficiently implemented in order to achieve intended outcomes.'

While the United States Co-operative Extension System has been required by law since its inception in 1914 to report annually on its programs, these reports have not been as critical for continuing public funding as they are in today's society (Rasmussen, 1989:254-256). During the 1980's, and continuing to the present, Agricultural Extension programs throughout the world have been changing.

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Many have either been eliminated, reduced, altered significantly, or barely able to maintain their status as a viable and reliable source of current scientific information (Rivera, 1997:63-67 and Richardson, 1987:5). While changes in agriculturally related extension systems are anticipated to continue in the future, the very dynamics of society and public policy are likely to require even greater accountability of extension organisations in order for them to survive or thrive (Rivera, 1996:29-37).

## **2. PROGRAM RELEVANCE REQUIRED**

Organisation/program relevance as to value to constituents and society is now the public norm for questioning the value of both public and private organisations. Shearon (1999:1) states that "this era of high accountability for publicly funded government programs is demanding more results and impact data to show societal relevance". The questions relating to relevance must be answered. Thus, organisations must be accountable to the entities asking these relevance and value questions. Such vigilance especially applies to public funded organisations who depend on public taxes for their support.

Co-operative/ Agricultural Extension is not alone in this relevance questioning. Much of this changing climate for increased accountability arises from the elimination of jobs in the private sector in the wave of efficiency movements of the 1980's and early 1990's. Correspondingly, private citizens, as customers of government services, came to expect the same levels of increased efficiency and productivity improvements as they were seeing in the private sector. Since many citizens had personally experienced downsizing or re-engineering in the private sector, they expected the same principles of effectiveness and productiveness to apply to the government sector as well (Few & Voght, 1997:41-53). Simply stated, government programs must have sufficient public benefits that make them worthy of continuing public financial support.

## **3. PROGRAM IMPACTS**

In judging public benefit, "people impacts" are key factors in program accomplishments. The people impacts may be indicated as financial gains; taxpayer savings; efficiencies gained; environmental enhancements or protection; individual life enhancements; resources preserved; or societal improvements (Bennett, 1996). Ladewig (1997:7) describes impact in the context of what happens as a result of what we do: Learning developed (attitudes, knowledge, skills); behaviours change (application of what is learned); and Impacts of results on customers and general public). Regardless of ultimate level of impact, increasingly program accountability must focus on assuring that targeted audiences are informed of "people impacts" plus other program successes as

desired by a specific audience (Gale, 1994:2-7 and Sherman, 1995).

This growing emphasis on accountability in the United States led to the passage of the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) in 1993, with full implementation during 1997-98. The GPRA Act's language specified clear accountability expectations from all entities of the United States Government. The intent of the law was primarily to:

- improve federal program effectiveness and public accountability by promoting a new focus on results, service quality, and customer satisfaction;
- improve the confidence of the American people in the capability of the Federal Government, by systematically holding Federal agencies accountable for achieving program results (Government Performance and Results Act of 1993).

A continuing focus on accountability was shown by the passage of additional federal laws during 1998 to assure the involvement of stakeholders in making and reviewing programming decisions in agricultural research and extension (AREERA, 1998). The guidelines for program planning and reporting from this latest federal Act states that "Institutions should describe the contributions of extension staff and programs toward impacts rather than describe the programs." (USDA, 1999:10).

In other countries as well, such as China, India, Poland, South Africa and Uganda, accountability is an important factor for program development. Stakeholder involvement in program decision making has been identified as a key reform of extension in order to enhance its accountability to the people it is intended to serve (Bahn & Evans, 1999:3, Donovan & Tucker, 1999:2, Swanson, 1999:8, Human & Carnegie, 1998:7 and Kabwika, *et al.*, 1999:3).

Indeed, a search of current literature relating to extension systems accountability and reform has a common reference to partnerships, decentralisation, privatisation, collaboration, impacts, user involvement, grassroots, cost-effectiveness, private/public partnerships and privatisation (AIAEE, 1999). In order to gain greater viability and accountability, the two largest systems in the world, China and India respectively, have been actively reforming their systems to make extension and the overall technology transfer system more demand driven and responsive to user needs (Swanson, 1999:8).

Such reforms are seen by Campbell (1999:5) as critical when he explains that "public sector extension is now at a crossroads. It has to deliver to stay alive. Governments are now questioning and reviewing the operations and

management of extension services. They are exploring options. Some are actively pursuing the privatisation model. There is therefore urgent need for extension to show impact. In the development of its objectives and programmes public sector extension needs to take on board new strategies to actively involve its clientele. In keeping with this new thought extension organisations must be more transparent and as such more accountable." Even with reforms, Rivera (1999:6) projects 'that national public sector extension will probably continue to diminish or be dismantled in both developed and developing countries.' However, he goes on to say that 'new priorities will likely challenge the public sector to develop new extension programs utilising new methods and working with new as well as traditional clientele.'

#### **4. COST EFFECTIVENESS**

The General Accounting Office of the US government (GAO/GGD-98) describes cost-effectiveness analysis as a means to 'compare a program's outputs or outcomes with the costs (resources expended) to produce them.' When applied to existing programs, they are also considered a form of program evaluation. Cost-effectiveness analysis assesses the cost of meeting a single goal or objective, and can be used to identify the least costly alternative to meet that goal.

As has been explained, not only are extension organisations being held more accountable for its programs and services, those services are now being assessed as to level of efficiency and real benefits to clients and society, or otherwise, their cost-effectiveness as compared to alternatives. O'Neill (1999) explains that extension leaders in Ireland are now required to show 'value for money', with policy makers demanding evidence that expenditures on extension's services are cost-effective when compared to other uses of public funds. Both effectiveness and efficiency are taken into consideration. Similar sentiments are described by Donovan & Tucker (1999:1-7) and Campbell (1999:1) as they explained comparisons to private extension systems such as commodity based entities that can be much more focused on the needs, issues and technologies associated with a single commodity. Human & Carnegie (1998) offer specific suggestions as to how publicly supported extension 'inputs must be co-ordinated with co-operative, NGO and private inputs and the public sector seen as an implementor, and the financier of last resort. Where feasible and less costly opportunities for cost recovery and out-sourcing public services should be taken. This will also reduce recurrent budget commitment.'

Such analysis and comparison is leading to reforms that are described around the world. In the state of Victoria, Australia for example, economic models are being developed to judge the monetary value of extension program results for programs that are often difficult to assign values, such as those focusing on the

environment (O'Neill, 1998). With the increasing emphasis on programs that produce impacts and assessments of their cost effectiveness, accountability to users and others is a must. Proactively assuring that sufficient knowledge exists among users and others about extension and its program impacts is critical in order for the financial support required for a viable extension system to be provided. Therefore, as with the planning and delivery of quality extension programs, extension must also strategically plan for its accountability functions as a vital component of its operations.

## **5. STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR ACCOUNTABILITY**

Liles (1998), has formulated a strategic guide for effectively developing a strategic plan for accountability functions within any extension system. He describes the plan as a systems approach that give a step-by-step procedure for assuring that adequate and correct accountability functions are undertaken. An accountability plan has been developed by the North Carolina Co-operative Extension System. Some of the primary components of that plan are listed and the key steps of the plan are described (NCCESTMTF, 1998).

### ***Step A: Environmental analysis***

*Question:* Who are the primary customers or stakeholders for accountability information?

*Results:* Thirteen primary stakeholders were identified including state legislators, county administrators, the news media and federal legislators.

*Question::* What are trends and issues (forces) affecting the marketing of program impacts?

*Results:* Urbanising of the N.C. legislature, changing customer expectations, competition from other agencies, technological advances, etc.

*Question:* What are the needs and expectations of our primary customers for accountability information?

*Results:* Credible evidence, dollar impacts, cost-benefit information, people impacts, etc.

### ***Step B: Critical process audit***

*Question:* What is working well in getting accountability information to stakeholders?

*Results:* Maintaining visibility with county leaders, personal contact with officials, legislative tours, etc.

*Question::* What is working less well?

*Results:* Knowledge of stakeholders' preferred methods for receiving information, lack of organised communication strategy, co-ordination of marketing efforts, etc.

### ***Step C: Mission definition***

*Question::* Why does the Targeting Marketing for Accountability Task Force exist?

*Results::* Mission Statement: The mission of the targeted marketing effort is to provide the right accountability information to the right people at the right time in the right format.

### ***Step D: Vision building***

*Question:* What are the characteristics of an ideal impact marketing program one to three years from now?

*Results:* Audiences get information they need in the manner they want in a timely fashion; communication resources are directed to the highest priority marketing needs; agents write valid success stories; cost-benefit analysis data show favourable return on investment.

### ***Step E: Goal development***

*Question::* What goals must be achieved in the years ahead to move from our current reality to our vision?

*Results:*

- (1) The right people will be advocates and knowledgeable of NCCES impacts.
- (2) Relevant, high-quality program information is provided in a way that gets noticed.
- (3) NCCES is a recognised problem-solving organisation with identifiable accomplishments.
- (4) NCCES has a thorough, targeted marketing plan operating with adequate human and material resources.
- (5) Organisational support from major stakeholders is enhanced.

### ***Step F: Developing action plans***

Goals A through E are being implemented by using an action plan that specifies the action to be taken, the method or format to be used, the time frame for completing, the evidence of success, and the person(s) or unit(s) responsible for ensuring that the recommended action occurs.

## **6. TARGET AUDIENCES FOR ACCOUNTABILITY INFORMATION**

Even with the knowledge of an accountability strategic planning process, oftentimes, extension workers feel that their efforts speak for themselves, and are therefore reluctant to make proactive efforts to communicate their program impacts. Yet, in today's 'results-orientated' world, Extension like any other service, must advertise its achievements and establish its worth (Paxton & Culverwell, 1988). Administrators of public extension systems like leaders of all organisations today are being challenged to provide better, faster and cheaper programs, products and services (Spector, 1995).

While some similarity may apply to all audiences regarding accountability expectations, there can be great differences in what certain audiences desire or require to meet accountability needs. Some audiences may want only limited or highly specific information in order to satisfy their requirements, while others may desire more extensive information on program implementation as well as outcomes and impacts of those programs. With the differing needs in mind, the extension educator should address several key factors in order to develop and maintain a quality accountability system. These key factors can be listed as WHO, WHAT, WHEN, and HOW (Taylor-Powell, 1989).

First, the WHO should clearly identify those primary and secondary audiences for receiving accountability information. Then, define WHAT information will be provided to each audience, WHEN the information will be provided, and HOW the information will be provided or presented.

The key is to provide the right accountability information to the right people at the right time in the right format.

Planned accountability functions should include the development of specific matrices for clearly specifying the accountability approach by the extension organisation for each of its identified primary audiences for receiving program accountability information. A matrix developed for State Legislators is shown as follows:

**STATE LEGISLATORS TARGETED MARKETING ACTION PLAN**

**Goal statement: relevant high quality program information is provided audience: state legislators**

<b>What action</b>	<b>Format</b>	<b>When</b>	<b>Evidence</b>	<b>Person responsible</b>
Provide information relevant to respective legislators on current issues	Faxes, e-mail, letters, telephone calls, personal contacts, brochures, CALS quarterly magazine, back-up information on web sites	Just in time and in preparation for discussions	Documents, Report from Chancellors legislator liaison, Log of contacts, URL locations, Web hits	State Program Leaders Associate Director
Adjust the reporting system (ERS) so that data can be aggregated in different specified units	Another layer of ERS	Early 1998	ERS format	Computer Services
Develop quality/format and design standards for information provided	Template/Web Site Assure Communications flow, tell messages legislators want to hear and messages we want to communicate	Immediately  Use September through December for specific issues	Guidelines Templates	Associate Director
Conduct training on quality standards of impacts and results so that initiating reports are valid and reliable	In-service training curriculum	November 1998	Training agenda, Evaluations, Curriculum materials	Tom Knecht John Richardson CEMP Co-chairs

<b>What action</b>	<b>Format</b>	<b>When</b>	<b>Evidence</b>	<b>Person responsible</b>
Regularly provide county program accomplishments	E-mail, factsheets, news releases, brief impact statements, backup information on web sites	Not less than semi-annually, as events and circumstances dictate or as opportunities arise	Documents URL locations Web hits	CEMPs co-chair, County Directors
Regularly provide state-wide program accomplishments	E-mail, factsheets, news releases, brief impact statements, backup information on web sites	Not less than semi-annually, as events and circumstances dictate or as opportunities arise, county units (more frequent if possible)	Documents URL locations Web hits	Documents URL locations Web hits
Create a drop bucket and procedures to capture requests for information from this audience	Monthly e-mail message provided to Administration, Input on web format	1998	Data being collected, report generated	CEMP co-chairs Program Leaders
Identify alternative channels of communication to legislators including alternative channels	Report describing communication networks and strategy	June 1998	June 1998	Kevin Gamble
Evaluate each step in the process	Evaluation plan	1998	Report Evaluation Plan	Associate Director TM co-chairs

\*Description of actions taken/type(s) of information to be provided.

Thirteen primary audiences have been identified by the North Carolina Co-operative Extension System (NCCES) for receiving specific accountability information. These audiences are: State Legislators; County Commissioners; Federal Legislators; County Administrators; Legislative Staff (State and Federal); University Administrators; News Media; Key Influential Informal and Opinion Leaders; Extension (internal); Commodity Associations; Extension Clientele; Citizen Advisory Council; Program Partners (NCCES Targeted Marketing Task Force Report, 1998).

## **7. SUCCESS STORIES FOR ACCOUNTABILITY**

As shown, Co-operative Extension has a large number of audiences that expect, and some require, accountability information (NCCESTMTF, 1998). While the audiences may be different in other locations, the key is to develop a plan for accountability and implement it to focus on each of the respective audiences who are identified in the plan. Based on evidence gained from many of the identified audiences in the North Carolina plan, concise success stories that indicate practice adoption or changed behaviours by clients or positive impacts on clients have generally been found to be highly popular for communicating program impacts.

Considerable anecdotal input and feedback from State Legislators, Congressional staff and others, have made it obvious that brief, concise statements focussed directly to the core of a program and its results are highly preferred over more lengthy, explanatory documents. Therefore, based on this evidence, success stories are used by the North Carolina Co-operative Extension System (NCCES) for productive program accountability purposes that provides conciseness that gets to the heart of the program outcome and impact. The following are comments reflecting the attitudes of some of the NCCES audiences for accountability information:

- “We want brief, concise reports of accomplishments that cover the main points of: Who's involved; Problem; What you did; Difference it made; any collaborators; Contact person; and ‘on one page’”. (Congressional Aide for US Congresswoman Eva Clayton)
- “We want brief reports of Extension accomplishments that get to the heart of the subject and are no more than one page”. (N. C. Representative Howard Hunter’s aide)
- “I want information that is really concise, tells me what is happening without wasting words, and that I can read very quickly”. (Member of N. C. House of

Representatives)

- “My Extension Advisory Council members expressed a preference for brief success stories by indicating their pleasure with a marketing piece that we used for program reporting that included success stories only. They specifically requested that I provide this type of document to them periodically”. (J. S., NCCES County Extension Director)
- “My county advisory council, county commissioners, and county manager really like this kind of concise information from Extension”. (H. S., NCCES County Extension Director)
- “Our success stories go to approximately 2,000 people which include county commissioners, legislators, mayors, city council members, key government staff members, advisory leadership system, all people on our mailing list, and media. We also use them when introducing Extension to new potential audiences. In addition, we use them for manager reports that we do twice per month to county management”. (M. B., NCCES County Extension Director)

Generally, success stories are written to convey the problem, program, people served, partners, the impact and a conclusion. While obviously popular with some audiences, such concise statements of approximately 150 words indicating programmatic impacts will not meet some accountability needs. In North Carolina for example, NCCES must also provide to the Federal government participation data such as numbers of face-to-face teaching contacts. NCCES must also provide to the state university system information on the numbers and types of non-degree credit activities conducted by extension throughout the state of North Carolina. Other reports required at the local level may be the number of activities or events held, such as the number of radio and television programs presented or the number of newspaper stories published. The key is to recognise that a single approach to providing accountability information to all audiences will simply not suffice. What will be needed is a planned system for data collection in order to meet the varied accountability requirements facing an extension system.

## **8. ESTABLISHING A DATA COLLECTION SYSTEM**

With a vast array of accountability needs clearly evident, a strategic plan alone will not adequately serve the accountability needs of extension. A data collection and management system that is sufficiently established and managed must be a critical component of any accountability system. Having a defined database to turn to in an instant not only provides users the accountability information they

require but also can be highly impressive as well, due to the speed of the response to the request. Such speed and dependability for quality program activity and/or impact information can produce highly positive responses from those who need or require such information. Obviously, with an established and well-maintained database, proactive accountability efforts can be undertaken to supply appropriate impact and accountability information to identified audiences without their having to ask.

In establishing an electronic World Wide Web based reporting system for NCCES, we defined a goal *'To establish an effective and efficient reporting system that is user friendly, easily accessible, and provides needed organisational accountability requirements'*.

With the goal as the guiding principal, objectives were then developed which included:

- Provide cumulative program progress;
- Provide a mechanism for reporting program success;
- Capture State Major Programs (SMP), other programs and special projects;
- Accessible at all organisational levels;
- Capture creative use of program delivery;
- Meet reporting requirements of Co-operative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES), the federal partner;
- User friendly;
- System is continuously updated, accessible, and can be monitored;
- include data and information necessary for reports at all levels of the organisation;
- Continuous comprehensive instructions and training to be provided for proficient use of the system to include inputs and outputs;
- Continuous allocation of resources to include personnel, hardware, and software

- Reduce information processing;

## 9. CONCLUSION

A World Bank study of a hundred and two countries concluded that only 16% of growth is explained by physical capital (machinery, buildings and physical infrastructure), while 20% comes from natural capital (environment and natural resource). But no less than 64% can be attributed to human development and social capital for the individual, community and society (Human & Carnegie, 1998:2). With findings such as these, there is little argument that a need for user based non-formal education will continue to exist in society, and extension has long been seen as an instrument in this process, albeit not very successful at times.

While Rivera (1999:6) stated that public extension systems are likely to continue to face severe constraints on, and competition for, available funding resources, it is clear that many are recognising the need to be closely connected to clients in providing 'bottoms up' programming rather than 'top down' programs. In making these transitions to focus on the needs of the user, and being more accountable for its programs and efforts, public extension has shown great resiliency and has garnered significant support as policy makers and the public became aware of its program impacts on real people in the real world.

In meeting the challenge to gain and maintain credibility with the public as well as its many users, perhaps the insights offered by Human & Carnegie (1998:12-13) are most valid and should be used as a guiding principle for extension:

*"The challenge is for public administrations, in addition to democratic accountability through the legislature, to develop and institutionalise mechanisms and systems by which to be directly accountable to its clients. In order to do this, departments of agriculture need to identify their clients, establish their needs (acknowledging their constant change), decide on the services, and then take on the responsibility of ensuring that the services are provided. This includes client involvement in the needs assessments, planning, implementation monitoring and evaluation stages of government, out sourcing and partnerships with other sectors and organisations. However, it is important to focus on the outcomes - tangible results on the ground."*

It is evident that across the world, "hard" questions are being asked as to the relevance of extension and the cost effectiveness of its programs when compared to alternative programs or opportunities. Recognition of this growing, ever-present requirement for accountability and efficiency is a must. Communication of the impacts and positive results to key audiences is also a must. Developing

and implementing a strategic plan for achieving these “musts” is critical. Questions related to the viability of extension in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can be expected to continue. Anything short of increased vigilance of accountability needs and the communication of extension impact information to targeted as well as other audiences will surely result in reduced support for extension.

In North Carolina, NCCES is focusing its programs on producing real program impacts. Appropriate training is being provided to field and campus based faculty for them to continue to improve the quality of their accomplishment reports. And, if needed, administrative sanctions are used to assure the needed attention on accountability functions of the organisation. However, both in North Carolina and nation-wide, anything short of this rapid and continuing improvement in accountability can potentially place the funding of NCCES as well as the entire Co-operative Extension System in the USA in great peril. Clearly, these statements have similar applicability for extension around the world.

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