Developing a Program Plan Based on the Program Planning Cycle[1]

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Abstract

For over a century, Extension services within the United States have used specific program development plans to create or refine optimal programmatic services for clientele (Franz, Garst, & Gagnon, 2015). Though developmental models may vary, planning or refinement for any program features some core developmental principles. Therefore, this article seeks to provide an overview of these fundamental tenets within program planning, how a planning process informs an overarching development plan, and why these components are integral to Extension services. The incorporation of a planning process and the application of targeted, outcome-focused planning principles are paramount in building a program capable of delivering sustainable and desirable outcomes to clients (Diehl & Galindo-Gonzalez, 2011).

Why Develop a Program Plan? Purpose & Benefits

Given the recognition that an educational program must deliver targeted and measurable outcomes to distinguish itself from a mere "set of activities" (Harder, 2010), an effective program plan must have an "outcome-focused" orientation to best measure, track, and respond to the eclectic and shifting needs of the communities Extension serves. This orientation can be represented by the core planning principles developed by United Way Worldwide (Plantz, 2009). These principles, which are summarized in *Planning or Refining an Extension Program* (Diehl & Galindo-Gonzalez, 2011), are built in to the steps representing the program planning cycle. They include:

- basing decisions on facts
- engaging critical stakeholders
- being specific about intended outcomes
- addressing complex underlying issues
- aiming for long-term community impact
- refining a plan through consistent communication and feedback

Employment of the program planning cycle in conjunction with an appropriately selected program planning model (Boone, Safrit, & Jones, 2002; Gusto, Diaz,& Diehl, 2017, manuscript submitted for publication) will produce a comprehensive program plan. The components of this plan, discussed in more detail in the next section, include a robust situational statement, a strong outline of defined program objectives, a detailed description of target audiences, a list of educational methods and activities, a catalogue of outputs or number of educational series or items (i.e. workbooks) produced for the program, and an evaluation plan to effectively assess and measure program objectives.

Once planning outcomes are identified and established, an organization is positioned to improve the strength of a program and to deliver a host of benefits for stakeholders and the population of interest. Boone et al. (2002) crafted four points that emphasize the importance of planning to programming and that can easily be applied to programmatic content within any area of Extension work. According to the authors, adequate planning:

1. Enables an organization or program to remain fluid and builds in a capacity to scan and analyze the socio-cultural, technological, economic, and political contexts in which it operates.

2. Provides a blueprint for appropriate response to uncertainty and change.

3. Allows for increased control by collecting information for more responsive evaluation and analysis of program services.

4. Better positions a program to foresee and mitigate against any potential future obstacles and barriers to program delivery and impact (Boone et al., 2002).

In addition, effective program planning has been demonstrated to justify budgetary requests, actualize public engagement, and contribute to "self-help, independence, and positive end results" for clientele (Forest & Baker, 1994). According to Koehnen, Portela, and Cristóvão (1992), adequate program planning and development offers a host of benefits for program developers, including involving needs and interest analysis, channeling energies and resources in appropriate directions, strengthening program resources, improving team and community capacities, and much more.

Key Components of a Program Plan Informed by the Planning Cycle

A comprehensive program plan should feature some variation of the core components mentioned in the introductory section. These consist of a situational statement, an outline of program objectives, a description of target audiences, a list of educational methods and activities, a catalogue of outputs/number of educational series or items produced for the program, and an evaluation plan to effectively assess and measure program objectives. It is important to distinguish a program plan from any one of its constituent components. For example, a logic model, as a diagram

depicting sequences of major components of a program and a way to specify desired program outcomes, is a crucial step in program plan development, but is not comprehensively representative of a program plan. Instead, a logic model should be viewed as a useful tool to help visualize, organize, and focus a program's intended outcomes. Logic models are further detailed in the program planning cycle described by Diehl and Galindo-Gonzalez (2011) and are discussed in the context of the "evaluation plan" component described in the section below.

Building planning components and achieving the overall potential impact of a program plan requires referencing the fundamental outcome-focused principles addressed in the preceding section and the eight-step program planning cycle detailed by Diehl and Galindo-Gonzalez (2011). The planning cycle can be thought of as an iterative strategy for building the components of the program plan listed above and for ultimately helping to achieve the program's primary outcomes once enacted. The eight planning cycle steps include:

- engaging stakeholders in dialogue
- conducting a situational analysis/needs assessment
- developing program goals and objectives
- developing a logic model
- developing an educational program, approach and materials
- deliver the program
- evaluate, analyze and report
- learn, modify, and improve

Despite the different environmental conditions and contexts Extension planners may be operating within, the cycle steps will largely remain consistent for program planners, systematically embedding the principles of outcome-focused planning (basing decisions on facts, engaging critical stakeholders, being specific about intended outcomes, etc.) presented earlier. These steps will be considered in relation to how they inform the key components of the program plan. Multiple planning cycle steps are used in a systematic and iterative manner to produce the components of a program plan. For a more thorough overview of the process cycle and how they may be strategically referenced to build program plan outcomes, see Diehl and Galindo-Gonzalez's (2011) *Planning or Refining an Extension Program.* Descriptions of the plan components, their value to program designers, and how they are produced with reference to the planning cycle are presented below.

a. Situation statement

A strong situation statement should aim to address critical community needs, desired educational programming, Extension topics and priorities, possible funding sources, a program's strengths, weaknesses, and capacities, and resources and barriers (Diehl & Galindo-Gonzalez, 2011). This statement is crafted by referencing the program planning cycle steps, particularly by *engaging key stakeholders*, and recognizing what a *situational analysis/needs assessment* entails for the program. Therefore, a situational statement is formulated with strategic input by participant focus groups or advisory committees, along with an Extension professional's own effort to build their knowledge base though resources like state specialists and professional development literature (see the Program Development and Evaluation Center [PDEC] website: http://pdec.ifas.ufl.edu/prof_dev.shtml). This process may assist in the development of survey questions that will help collect more generalizable information at a broader scale. The stakeholder information collected here will provide leverage for the program planner to determine how they may contribute their expertise broadly and how specific and targeted outcomes can be developed with participant needs in mind (*situational analysis/needs assessment*). This information, analyzed and consolidated in statement form, helps to determine context-driven strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, among other conditions. These are paramount in the formation of defined outcomes for a program. A sample situation statement can be found from a UF/IFAS statewide organizational management initiative to support the development of 4-H Youth Programs (http://pdec.ifas.ufl.edu/roadmap/YouthSystems_PoA.pdf).

b. Outline of defined outcomes/objectives of program

A formalized outline of the defined outcomes of a program provides Extension professionals a framework of clearly defined program goals, which is instrumental in establishing program parameters, focused direction, and a platform for the later evaluation of program performance. The SMART framework has been frequently recommended to assist program planners in developing strong objectives (Diehl & Galindo-Gonzalez, 2012). Program objectives guided by this framework are designed to be: **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**elevant, and **T**ime-bound (Patton, 2008). Diehl and Galindo-Gonzalez (2012) offer a SMART objective example for an after-school program: "Within one year, 90% of youth in school enrichment programs will improve their skills related to self-awareness, decision making, and organization as measured by pre/post tests and teacher observations."

Without a detailed outcome outline, a program loses its goal orientation and capacity to effectively evaluate itself post-implementation. This program plan component is directly related to the program planning cycle step of developing goals and objectives, which takes into consideration the insights provide by engaging stakeholders and by conducting a situational analysis/needs assessment. The logic model provides a useful tool to organize program outcomes in a sequential manner and to develop objectives that are important to the success of the program. Figure 1 outlines the diagrammed depiction of the major components of the program's outcomes that may be short-term, intermediate, or long-term (Israel, 2001). These outcome levels should be mirrored by the plan's program objectives. For more information on logic models and examples of potential program logic models, see Israel's article, *Using Logic Models for Program Development*.
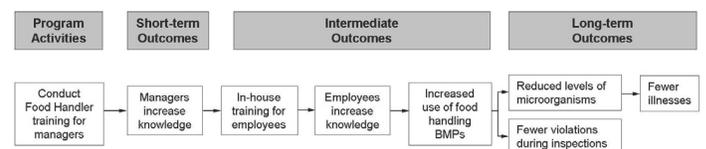

Figure 1. Food Safety Program Logic Model.
Credits: Glenn Israel (2001)

c. Description of targeted audience

Describing the target audience(s) is a key component of your program plan and involves identifying the motivations, barriers, potential costs, and benefits for that audience. If an Extension programmer were interested in a precise description of a target audience, they would benefit from starting at the beginning of the program planning cycle. Extension educators have the opportunity to use the information collected throughout the planning process to develop a rich description of their program's target audience. Creating an explicit description will help to promote the awareness and inclusion of key stakeholders into program planning and facilitate a stakeholder-driven process for the development and refinement of the program. In other words, an appropriately identified audience segment will have an important way to take action or engage in some meaningful way with the situation you have identified for treatment. Finding and effectively assessing the right target audience will have significant implications for the overall success of a program. Defining the audience in your plan ensures that your program is centered on that group's specific needs. If, for example, a program planner was to reference program cycle steps (engage stakeholders in dialogue, conduct situational analysis, etc.) and conduct focus groups with a particular audience segment, the

planner would have a more robust understanding of that audience's perceived benefits and cost relative to whatever the proposed objectives may be. An information/marketing campaign designed to raise awareness about seagrass scarring from haphazard use of boat propellers might target and describe an audience of novice recreational boaters, noting demographic information, the audiences' knowledge of seagrass, their belief as to whether increasing their knowledge can lend to a positive behavior change, and their motivation for doing so relative to the barriers, cost, or benefit they perceive.

d. Educational methods and activities

Identifying the methods, activities and inputs necessary for program implementation is another important step and is achieved by developing educational methods that are tailored to the target audience. According to Stofer (2017), "there are several types of learning experiences that can be put into many different formats of programming, including hands-on, experiential or integrative, inquiry or practice based, and reinforcement or knowledge-directed." Each of these educational methods incorporates a specific set of activities and/or experiences. For example, a hands-on educational method may mean attending a field day/workshop. An inquiry/practice-based method typically involves use of elements of the scientific method, like hypothesis and experimentation. This could translate into conducting observations or focus groups as activities (Stofer, 2017). The diverse range of considerations for method and delivery format for activities reflects current deliberation within Extension literature as to whether educational facilitation or teaching (formal information delivery) is more effective in reaching and retaining Extension clientele (Stofer, 2017). Perhaps the most useful consideration in developing an educational strategy is in referencing the program cycle steps (insights from key stakeholders, conducting a situational analysis, etc.). In understanding the educational needs of the target audience and the intended outcomes of a program, you can leverage already-existing methods that have been published in the literature and produce the intended outcomes, or develop your own methods based on theoretical frameworks. Typically, you would outline your educational activities, in relationship to methods mentioned above, within the logic model framework in a series format to move the target audience towards the intended long-term outcomes of the program.

e. Outputs

Outputs within a program plan describe the intended number of educational series, deliverables (workbooks,

pamphlets, documents, etc.), or participants for your program. These outputs should be integrated into your logic model and be directly related to your intentions for developing an educational program, approach, and materials. Outlining outputs in a program plan help Extension educators design activities that respond to specific targeted behavior, attitude and learning objectives. A program will ultimately have to produce both the tangible and intangible material-resources (outputs) that will help to enact the design activities. By outlining these intentions in your program plan, it provides important data points in identifying any potential delivery issues through the evaluative phase.

f. Evaluation Plan

The validity, rigor, and overall success of a program cannot be adequately assessed without the diligent collection of data guided by specific and measurable program objectives and outcomes. Two types of evaluation are utilized depending on the objectives/outcomes previously identified by referencing the SMART objectives framework (Diehl & Galindo-Gonzalez, 2012) and the program cycle steps (ie: logic model, situational analysis). According to Rockwell and Bennett (2004) the *process* evaluation "assesses a program activities' conformance to statutory and regulatory requirements, program design, and professional standards or customer expectation." The feedback gleaned from a process evaluation in invaluable in monitoring and improving the fiscal and structural mechanics of a program (Harder, 2009). The *outcomes* evaluation ultimately measures shifts in participant knowledge, attitudes, skills, and aspirations (KASA); participant behavior; and social, environmental, and economic outcomes (Rockwell & Bennett, 2004). The outcomes evaluation focuses on measuring the immediate, medium, and long-term impacts or benefits of a program for individuals and communities (Harder, 2009). The University of Wisconsin Extension Service (2006) recommends that managing both evaluation strains involves a series of five steps: engage stakeholders, focus, collect data, analyze & interpret, and use. (More information can be found at: http://learningstore.uwex.edu/assets/pdfs/G3658-1W.PDF). In each of the above steps, several planning cycle steps (engage stakeholders, conduct a situational analysis) overlap and can enhance the evaluation process. Deliberate and targeted engagement with the process-steps within the program planning cycle may ultimately assist in the identification and measurement of outcomes.

Evaluation plans should ultimately outline a means for evaluating both quality of process and the achievement of intended outcomes. By using the logic model, a program

designer/evaluator can identify where certain outcomes may occur, and can develop effective evaluation instruments to gauge impact in accordance with the program's key objectives for a target audience. Also understanding the information needs of stakeholders through their engagement in the planning process allows an Extension agent to provide more complete or responsive information through marketing materials or evaluation reports. This provides information that can satisfy or address those needs. An evaluation plan will be inherently dependent upon earlier program plan components that were shaped or molded by engagement with the planning process cycle.

Conclusion

Program development has been described by Seevers and Graham (2012) as "a continuous series of complex, interrelated processes which result in the accomplishment of the educational mission and objectives of the organization." Given this definition, it follows that the outcome-components are fundamental to a program's development and ultimate success. At each step, Extension professionals will be able to plan outcome-components that are dynamic and deeply intertwined with other components to build a resilient program plan. Through use of the Program Planning Cycle and reference to the Program Development Models (Gusto, Diaz, & Diehl, 2017, manuscript submitted for publication), a program designer can build seemingly distinct components into an adaptive, interrelated plan. The program plan will aid Extension professionals in achieving objectives and meeting its commitments to key stakeholders by adhering to fact-based decision making, being specific about intended outcomes, addressing complex underlying issues, aiming for long-term community impact, and employing communication and feedback-driven refinement and adaptability.

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