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What Is an Extension Program? [1]

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Introduction

Although one might think that everyone in Extension understands the term *program*, it is often used in different ways. Sometimes people use it to reference activities such as field days, demonstrations, or presentations. From a program development and evaluation perspective, however, it has a different and specific meaning. A program, as it is used here, refers to a comprehensive set of activities that includes an educational component that is intended to bring about a sequence of outcomes among targeted clients.

Consider the following situation: You feel tired, are feverish, and have an upper respiratory infection, so you go to the doctor. The doctor assesses your symptoms and determines that you have pneumonia, then prescribes rest and a two-week course of antibiotics. As you get ready to leave the doctor's office, the doctor warns you to take all of the antibiotics. A week later, the doctor's office calls to check on your progress and encourages you to complete the course of treatment. Although you feel better after a few days, you complete the full course of treatment.

This example illustrates important aspects of a program. First and most importantly, a program must provide enough treatment to cause a cure. Without sufficient rest and the proper dosage of antibiotics, the patient might not recover. Second, the correct treatment should be effective, but the wrong treatment might do more harm than good. The same is true for Extension programs. Extension must provide enough opportunities for learning (the treatment) in order for a program to have a real chance at helping clientele meet their needs (the cure). Those learning opportunities should be selected carefully based on research-based knowledge and an understanding of the target audience in order to avoid distributing information that could ultimately prove harmful rather than helpful.

This fact sheet provides a definition for the term *program* and discusses the primary components included in a program.

Concept of a Program

Boyle (1981) defined a program as "the product resulting from all the programming activities in which the professional educator and learners are involved" (p. 5). Programming activities include conducting a needs assessment and situational analysis, setting priorities, developing a program rationale and management plan, marketing and recruiting, conducting learning events, evaluating outcomes, and reporting (Boone, Safrit, & Jones, 2002; Boyle, 1981; Harder, 2010). Given that a program involves evaluation and reporting, the definition clearly implies that the goal of a program is to achieve changes in clientele knowledge, attitudes, skills, or aspirations; clientele behavior; or the social, economic, or environmental conditions in a community (Bennett & Rockwell, 1995; Harder, 2009; Israel, 2010). Collectively, these types of changes are referred to as *outcomes*.

Extension programs are organized in a variety of ways, and they address many different needs and issues. Every program has measurable outcomes; without measurable outcomes, programs are really just activities. Sample programs in Florida include:

Water Conservation: The Florida Yards & Neighborhoods (FYN) program offers education on Florida-Friendly Landscaping™, including how to irrigate efficiently. Improper irrigation results in unhealthy landscapes, wasted water, and wasted money. As a result of irrigation consultations and workshops included in an FYN program in Osceola County, participants adopted more efficient irrigation practices; water use records showed that these households saved approximately 2,000 gallons each month—a collective savings of over 4.7 million gallons of water per year in those households (Sullivan, 2010).

4-H Fit on the Farm: The program's main objective of the video series, "Barnyard Yoga," was to educate Seminole County youth about the importance of daily physical activity and drinking more water with meals. The target audience was 182 K-2nd graders at Goldsboro Elementary Magnet School, a Title I school. The school received yoga mats, water bottles and a DVD for each classroom. The DVDs were utilized during recess or as a break between lessons to emphasize the importance of physical activity and encourage youth to utilize their water bottles. "Barnyard Yoga" was demonstrated by Certified Personal Trainer and narrated by the 4-H Agent. As a result, 91% of 182 youth evaluated could identify and explain the importance of daily physical activity. Additionally, 78% of participating youth reported choosing water over juice or soda at meal times (McKenna, 2014).

The above examples illustrate that programs include many types of activities and outcomes. As the above examples illustrate, programs have several key elements:

- Multiple activities that build on and reinforce each other
- A focus on the needs of the target audience
- An intent to create change in a sequence of outcomes
- Ongoing monitoring to assess progress and a final evaluation to measure outcomes

A common misconception within Extension is that an activity is by itself a program: this is not so. Activities may lead to short-term outcomes being accomplished, but they usually lack the depth necessary to obtain lasting behavioral and social, economic, and environmental (SEE) condition outcomes.

Concept of a Major Program

Major programs are those that require a substantial investment of resources (e.g., expertise, time, and money) to conduct, that have the potential for substantial impact, and that reflect a comprehensive set of educational activities (Summerhill, 1994). The main idea behind a major program is that a bigger, more focused effort will lead to large-scale, significant impacts. As a rule of thumb, a major program involves a minimum of 40 days of planned time during each year of a multiyear program. Major programs often involve collaboration with county faculty members who have similar programs in other counties or with those in the same county who have complementary subject-matter expertise. Major programs also are likely to have strong linkages with state-level teams, which provide support with educational resources and related expertise.

The development of major programs by Extension faculty is consistent with expectations of clients and external stakeholders. That is, people expect Extension to do big things, and major programs are the mechanism for creating significant change. In addition, each faculty member is expected to develop one or more major programs and report on their outcomes in annual reports of accomplishment. More importantly, being able to document the scope and impact of major programs is critical for achieving permanent status (or tenure) and promotion at the university.

Concluding Comments

Programs are the heart and soul of Extension work. Extension's clients and funders expect county and state faculty to design and implement programs that make a difference in people's lives, both individually and collectively. A clear understanding of the primary components of a program is the foundation for designing and delivering the type of programs that provide "solutions for your life."

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