

# Extension Professionals: Anticipating and Solving Common Challenges in Planning and Delivering Educational Programs<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

The work of an Extension agent demands much more than just subject knowledge. An Extension career is exciting because no two days are the same. With that comes a variety of unexpected challenges. The delivery of programs to diverse clientele is, in itself, a skill and something that Extension agents improve over time. This article summarizes some common problems associated with delivering Extension programs and to recommend solutions.

## Common Challenges and Solutions Associated with Delivering Programs

There are a number of common challenges associated with conducting educational programs as an Extension educator or other educational outreach professional. Anticipating these potential challenges can ensure that your program appears professionally organized.

The following examples are some of the most common challenges faced by newer Extension and education professionals, each paired with some suggestions for overcoming them (Dromgoole & Boleman, 2006; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005; Murphrey & Dooley, 2000; Swanson & Falkman, 1997).

## Preparing the Program

- **Lack of confidence and fear about teaching an Extension program**—Many professional educators tend to feel anxious or fearful about conducting Extension educational activities and delivering programs.
- **Recommended solutions:**
  - The best way to address a lack of confidence is to be well prepared. Understand the material, practice the presentation, and anticipate potential questions. These things become easier each time one presents.
  - Consider attending a fellow agent's program and reflect on what he or she does that you like and could incorporate in your programs.
  - After each presentation you make, take a few minutes to reflect on what you want to change for next time. Try scheduling an extra 15 minutes in your breakdown schedule for this.
  - Ask fellow agents to share their tips for successful presentations and share your resources in return.
  - Consider a public speaking course such as Toastmasters.
  - Pay attention as opportunities present themselves to learn how speakers outside of Extension organize and deliver information. This can often reveal interesting

1. This document is AEC513, one of a series of the Agricultural Education and Communication Department, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date September 2014. Visit the EDIS website at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.

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and unique successful techniques that you may not commonly see in Extension presentations.

- **Problems with speakers**—This category of challenges include a number of potential situations. When relying on speakers for some or all of an agenda, it is helpful to be aware that speakers could fail to show up or arrive late for any number of reasons, such as an emergency or a miscommunication. There is also the possibility of speakers running over their allotted time, speaking off-topic from what they were asked to cover, or duplicating a topic that is being presented by another speaker.
- **Recommended solutions:**
  - Be sure to communicate expectations clearly when asking the speaker to participate. You should clearly review the topic, time, and dates; required arrival time; parking instructions; location; and the audience's needs and interests well ahead of time. If possible, re-confirm with the speaker(s) a few days before the event.
  - Always obtain multiple contact numbers for the speakers, especially cellular, so you can reach them if they are late or fail to show up. In turn, provide your contact information to the speakers prior to an educational event so they can reach you in case of an emergency.
  - If a speaker is arriving while you are presenting another part of the program, try to have an associate greet the presenter and give the speaker the necessary overview of facility layout, breaks, and technology considerations.
  - When relying on speakers to assist with your programs, it helps to have backup material that you plan to deliver in the case a speaker doesn't arrive. It also helps to have a back-up agenda in mind. For example, if the early morning speaker is running late, you may have a pre-planned scenario in mind for moving another speaker or agenda item earlier in the program.
  - To keep speakers on track with timing, it is helpful to have a specified system in place to notify them of key time points, such as 10 and 5 minutes prior to their ending time. Hand signals or written signs are helpful and should be explained prior to the program. Build in a few minutes for technology setup and break down. Be sure to ask the presenter to arrive a few minutes before the presentation begins in order to set up technology.
- **Soliciting and incorporating feedback**—New agents may find it difficult to gauge their audience's

reactions in order to make adjustments during and after presentations.

- **Recommended solutions:**
  - Use post-training evaluation that asks for specific speaker and program and informal feedback to adjust future presentations.
  - Try to focus on asking the audience for their feedback while presenting. If possible, try to take a few notes on this feedback as you go along.
  - Seek out experts in the audience and ask how they approach the topic at hand.
  - Record your presentation for your own use to watch and reflect on at a later time.
- **Issues with teaching materials**—Novices may be concerned about how to use technology and teaching materials effectively and may worry about what to do when something doesn't work. Regardless of the location and the agent's experience, technology failure is always a possibility. When presenting in unfamiliar facilities, there is always a chance that the equipment or software is older or newer than what the agent used to create the presentation, which introduces potential technology compatibility issues. Internet can be unavailable at any time.
- **Recommended solutions:**
  - Regardless of what technology is used, prepare an alternative in case the technology does not work or does not show up. A low-tech backup plan is ideal when using a new facility. This may mean being comfortable with presenting the material "off the cuff," carrying poster-sized reprints of the most critical slides, or printing copies of your slides.
  - Plan for an incongruent operating system or software versions. When using PowerPoint™ or other presentation software, consider saving the presentation file in multiple formats, such as both current and older software versions, and even a platform-independent format such as Adobe PDF<sup>®</sup>.
  - Tell the speakers what technology is available, including whether the computer is Mac or PC, and what version the software is, so they can adjust and plan accordingly.
  - Inform the speakers of the type of communication technology available (audio/video, sound system) plus the availability or lack of Internet connection. It may be advisable to have speakers bring their own laptop computer.

- Conduct a test run to rehearse using the technology that will support the program, using all planned personnel and tools. Practice transitions between speakers for technologies such as videoconferencing and webinars.
- Receiving electronic slide presentations from speakers at least a day or more before workshops allows the opportunity to test them with the hardware and software that will be used, while still allowing time for corrections if necessary.
- **Facility issues**—Instructors may find themselves in unfamiliar locations or may not yet be acquainted with their home facilities. Another common facility issue occurs when the planned room is double-booked. Additionally, there may be circumstances where an unmanageable number of people show up to an event.
- **Recommended solutions:**
  - When using new facilities, plan to visit the location prior to the class or at least with adequate time prior to the event. At this time, be sure to test any site audiovisual equipment you plan to use to make sure it operates properly with your media.
  - If possible, secure a single point of contact for the facility to be your liaison before and during the event. Work with them to create alternative back-up plans.
  - Always have a plan for worst-case situations when you cannot use the planned room. This could mean moving to another location or having a plan for rescheduling.
  - Reconfirm the booking of the location as the program approaches to make sure no problems have developed and to remind those providing the facility of your program date.
- **Dependence on notes**—Presenters may feel uncomfortable with their dependence on notes and written materials.
- **Recommended solutions:**
  - Many speakers use notes, and new presenters should recognize that there is nothing wrong with doing so.
  - Try to have just enough notes to cue and remind you what you want to say rather than reading from them. If your notes incorporated in slide presentations, have the written points reinforce the key points you want to make.
  - Practice the presentation until it becomes natural. Focus on explaining the topic in your own words instead of reading from notes or slides.

## Delivering the Program

- **Getting the Extension class started**—It can be challenging to find ways to appropriately begin an Extension class.
- **Recommended solutions:**
  - Develop an atmosphere where participants are at ease; introduce yourself as participants arrive. This helps to create a room of friendly faces.
  - Introduce yourself to the whole group when you begin. You might post your contact information in your presentation or on a whiteboard for follow-up after the session.
  - Start on time. This demonstrates to the audience that you know how to run a program and respect the importance of audience members' time. Usually, this can help you start with an appreciative audience. Be sure to have contingencies to handle those who arrive late to the program to minimize distraction for those already there.
  - Rehearse the key items to review with participants. This may include restroom locations, wireless connections, turning off cell phones, class procedures, structure of educational programs, and an agenda including overview of scheduled meal and break times. These *advance organizers* help orient participants, especially those new to your programs themselves, as to what to expect throughout the session.
  - Consider using icebreakers or allowing the group to introduce themselves and share their reasons for attending. This will create an atmosphere of collegiality and shared purpose, assist participants in learning from each other's experiences, and help speakers better target comments to the needs of the audience members.
- **Credibility**—Newer professionals may feel that their audience does not find them credible as experts in their fields.
- **Recommended solutions:**
  - Share your personal background; what credentials you hold, including experience from outside of formal school settings; and what experiences led you to your current position.
  - Recognize that you are the expert on the topic and your role is to translate knowledge that is useful to the audience; at the same time, it is perfectly fine, and respectable, to admit not knowing an answer and commit to researching the questions.

- When appropriate, solicit participants' experiences and expertise.
- Remember, it often takes two or more years before new agents will start seeing measurable levels of credibility develop.
- **Personal experiences**—Newer educators may lack stories to share about their own personal involvement with the subject matter.
- **Recommended solutions:**
  - When developing presentations, try to identify experiences that may be relevant to the materials. It helps to think about this ahead of time. Locally or regionally appropriate experiences are generally most useful, as opposed to work done in a distant location not directly related to local material being covered.
  - Early on, when you may not have many examples, you may consider using case studies or the experiences of others.
  - Depending on your comfort level, you might also solicit experiences from participants to discuss. This could be done via a pre-survey as part of your evaluation and assessment or during the program itself.
- **Addressing audience questions**—It may be hard to respond to questions or there may be a concern that the questions received may be difficult. New agents may be concerned that there will be a question they cannot answer.
- **Recommended solutions:**
  - Consider what questions may be asked prior to the presentation and have answers prepared.
  - Repeat or re-phrase questions after they are asked and summarize them before answering. This allows you to clarify that you are addressing the questioner's concern, to make sure the audience heard the question, and to take a moment to decide how to respond.
  - If using a microphone, conference call, or distance learning session, or recording the session for later use, be sure to repeat questions into the microphone.
  - Be confident in saying "I don't know," and either ask the audience or speakers for their thoughts or commit to researching the question and following up. If appropriate, point questioners to resources they might consult themselves while you conduct your own research. Sometimes you may be able to leave the room for a short period during another speaker's presentation to call an appropriate expert or search the Internet and then provide the answer after the speaker finishes.
- **Ending the Extension class**—Newer educators may lack experience using closing techniques to appropriately end an Extension class. This may include using summaries and closings.
- **Recommended solutions:**
  - Practice summarizing the program and giving participants some action items or next steps. Many will be interested in other ways to get involved or attend other presentations. A slide or handout with upcoming classes is helpful, as is the presentation of resources for where to learn more.
  - If participants need to do something, such as completing an evaluation or certification exam, it helps to let them know early in the program so there are no surprises.
  - Always close by thanking participants and speakers.
  - End on time to be respectful of participants' time, speakers' time, and the facility's time, as well as your own time.

## Audience Considerations

- **Lack of participation**—There may be a concern that program attendees won't participate or that there will not be enough attendees to make for an adequate class. Part of this may stem from the participants' previous experiences with other programming that does not encourage participation.
- **Recommended solutions:**
  - Use questioning as a teaching tool, and be sure to give participants time to think before they answer. A mix of open-ended and closed-ended questions invites different types of participation.
  - Provide opportunities for participants to interact with each other. Perhaps instead of answering a question you or a participant poses, ask the other participants for their thoughts.
  - Small groups can be useful in encouraging quiet people to contribute and learn.
  - Mix up your delivery styles throughout the program, using lecture, hands-on and experiential, and questioning sessions. Not all participants will feel comfortable with every style, but using more styles makes it more likely they will find one that works for them.
  - Invite individuals to share their experiences and goals. This can take place as early as the very beginning of

the class, during introductions. Try to spread this around the audience so that only one or two individuals do not dominate.

- **Difficult clients**—Sometimes it can be challenging to handle a difficult participant who may challenge your authority or otherwise disrupt the program.
- **Recommended solutions:**
  - Address the difficult person directly.
  - Bypass difficult behavior. For example, if someone is asking belligerent questions, do not take additional questions. Possibly these individuals can be redirected with a statement like “in the interest of time, why don’t you and I discuss that further during the break or at the end of the program.”
- **Timing issues**—Less-experienced educators may find it difficult to stay on time while not rushing or have enough prepared to fill the allotted class time.
- **Recommended solutions:**
  - Ensure there is a clock in the presentation location. Otherwise, bring a clock or watch.
  - Prioritize subject matter so you will be prepared to omit something if time runs short.
  - Plan for an additional activity or topics in case the presentation concludes too early.
  - Practice presentations for timing. Invite other agents to be your audience and provide feedback, but be sure to offer to do the same for them.
- **Meeting audience needs**—Newer educators might find it challenging to modify the planned material during delivery to meet the needs of clients. Sometimes an audience may be much more or much less knowledgeable than anticipated.
- **Recommended solutions:**
  - Research the audience as much as is feasible beforehand. Familiarize yourself with their level of knowledge on a given topic or extent of use of a particular tool or method. You can use evaluations from previous programs, or conduct a needs assessment of your own if possible.
  - Have a plan for alternate activities or topics in case this is needed.
  - Tune in to nonverbal cues that the material may be too easy or difficult.
  - Practice delivering the material on more- and less-technical levels, so adjustments can be made.

## Conclusion

While no one is immune to the above-mentioned common challenges associated with conducting educational programs for Extension clients, the difficulties mentioned above become less impactful and easier to anticipate with experience and confidence. It helps to be aware of potential challenges and to plan accordingly; preparation also helps boost confidence. Try to anticipate and handle as many potential challenges before the day of the program. This helps reduce your stress on the day of the program, allows for a more professional presentation, and allows more time to deal with issue that may arise that you did not anticipate.

If you are confident as a presenter, you will inspire confidence in your programming.

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