

## Programming Techniques & Skills

### ABSTRACT

By Ralph Prince

Putting knowledge to work is the business of the Cooperative Extension System. With a network of university-affiliated staff in more than 3,000 counties across the country, Cooperative Extension plays a key role in focusing the resources of America's land grant universities on local needs and issues. Because of this "grassroots" orientation, the accomplishments of Cooperative Extension are many and varied. But Cooperative Extension's most significant accomplishments are not the result of random actions and events. Rather, they are a product of the deliberate planning, disciplined implementation, and systematic evaluation of educational **programs** which meet the needs of local citizens. Extension programs are created through a process called **program development**. Program development is defined as ***a deliberate process through which Extension staffs engage representatives of the public in planning, implementing, and evaluating plans of action for addressing needs and issues they have helped to identify.*** Program development occurs at all levels of the Cooperative Extension System, however, the focus of this discussion is on developing county-level programs in partnership with local citizens.

Cooperative Extension uses a program development process made up of distinct but inter-related phases. The phases of the process are linked together to form what might be called a **cycle of programming**. These phases within the cycle may be termed differently from place to place but there are some **common elements** which we will address in this session.

Planning and programming begins with an organization's efforts to **develop linkages with the public in order to receive input** — vital to any grassroots organization. A strong County Extension advisory group is a critical part of these efforts to link the organization to the people and develop relevant effective programs. Advisory council members and Extension staff collect and interpret data relative to existing local issues and then develop a list of **program opportunities**. Then some **priority** of which **program opportunities** could and should be addressed results in a set of **program thrusts**. The **planning process** continues to **design programs** that address these priority program thrusts. Naturally the planned programs would then be **implemented** and the **results would be measured** to determine program effectiveness, program results, and perhaps indicators of next steps to take in programming. Advisory leaders and groups can and should become engaged at the beginning of this process. They should remain engaged throughout the process to ensure programs have the correct focus to address the priority issues in an appropriate manner and that there is the necessary local direction and support to implement and sustain the program.

Experience has shown that programs conceived, designed, and implemented solely by the paid staff of a grassroots organization are not likely to be effective. Furthermore, local citizens are more likely to support and promote programs they help design. Consequently, local citizens must be involved in program development from the very beginning of the process. Cooperative Extension typically utilizes both **formal** and **informal** mechanisms for building effective linkages with the public. **Formal mechanisms** include advisory boards, councils, committees, commodity groups, and task forces. **Informal mechanisms** include both strategic and unplanned interactions between members of the community which occur on a day-to-day basis. By living or working in the county they serve, advisory council members and county Extension staff develop a unique "feel" for the needs and wants of local citizens. They learn about the needs and issues of the community through routine contact with citizens. However, information obtained through such informal means is seldom collected in a systematic manner.

Consequently, there are no assurances that the information collected about local needs and issues is representative of the entire community. So, in addition to the informal mechanisms, some sort of formal structure is needed for systematically involving community members in the identification of local needs and issues. Extension has long used advisory groups to build linkages with local citizens.

Generally, the County Extension Council (termed differently from state to state) as a whole will play the lead role in processes leading up to the identification of local program priorities. Then, program development committees, task forces, and work groups frequently assume responsibility for the design, implementation, and evaluation of programs that address needs and issues that may even cut across program area boundaries. County Extension advisory groups should routinely conduct a self-assessment of its membership composition to ensure that there is proper representation from the groups mentioned above. Members can be added at any time to obtain the proper representation or balance in the group. Members should have a central interest in serving the needs of the county and be willing to share their perceptions, values, and beliefs for the common good of all residents. Ideally, members should represent a large number of actual or potential clientele and have something to share that will lead to better programs. Members should have skills that will help them function in a group setting.

Four stages of planning programs that we will address:

- *Situation Analysis*—done to reveal “what is”--“what are the issues?” (begins with data collection)
- *Identifying Program Opportunities* —what does the data say?; what potential programs might be needed?
- *Priority Setting*—which issues should be addressed?
- *Program Design*—what is the strategy of the program to address these priority issues?

Most states have information on conducting these steps. One site is <http://www.ca.uky.edu/agpsd/powhelp.htm>.

As we have mentioned, County Extension advisory groups are an important mechanism by which Cooperative Extension receives input regarding the program needs of a particular county. But can we be assured that all of the citizens providing input have complete information about the county in which they live? Not necessarily. Even when an advisory group appears to be broadly representative of the local population, it is possible that program priorities established by such a group can sometimes fail to target important issues.

Advisory groups can examine **existing data** and gather **resident perspectives** to help identify program issues. While a core principle of Extension programming is an emphasis on local program determination, it is also important to acknowledge the role of **current research and knowledge** in setting program priorities. While some would argue that basing local programs on what researchers say would be “good for people” is too “top down” in nature, citizens are often unaware of new discoveries that have the potential to improve their lives. One could also argue that it is Extension’s **responsibility** to inform people of such discoveries and deliver programs which harness the benefits of those discoveries. Extension has long relied upon research to inform its selection of program priorities. This type of information is used to compliment “grassroots” programming.