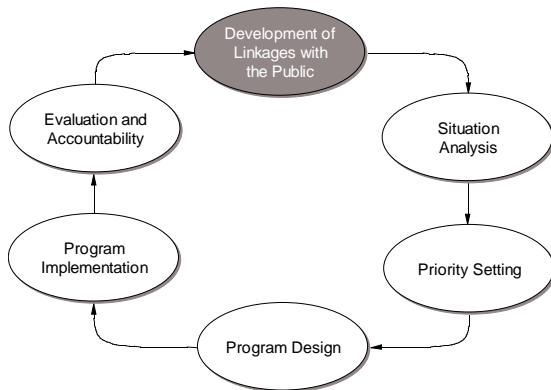PROGRAM AND STAFF DEVELOPMENT
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Development of Linkages with the Public

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Effective program development begins with building strong linkages with the public. Experience has shown that programs conceived, designed, and implemented solely by the paid staff of an organization are not likely to be effective. Furthermore, local citizens are more likely to support programs they help design and those programs will be more relevant to addressing local issues. 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 County Extension Councils, program area advisory councils, and a committee structure for the program development process. Informal mechanisms include both strategic and unplanned interactions with members of the community that which occur on a day-to-day basis.

Formal Mechanisms

County Extension Agents interact with the citizens of their county on a daily basis. During these encounters, citizens frequently discuss the problems, issues, and needs of the community. Information gained through these interactions become part of an agent's knowledge base about the community.

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 councils to build linkages with local citizens. Teitel (1994) defined advisory committees (councils), as "a group of volunteers that meets regularly on a long-term basis to provide advice and/or support to an institution or one of its sub-units." Or, as Thompson (1984) put it, advisory councils are a "bridge to the external public." Today, many other organizations are now re-discovering advisory groups as vehicles for getting citizen input into strategic planning, policy development, and program design.

Extension agents are frequently asked to facilitate the program development discussions which occur at Extension advisory council meetings. The job of a facilitator is to provide a framework and process for interaction. Members of the group provide the content. An effective facilitator helps the group maintain a balance between risk and stagnation, between too much agreement and too much conflict, and between individual needs and the common good.

County Extension Councils

Each county in Kentucky is expected to have a functioning County Extension Council (CEC) that provides input regarding needs and issues that Cooperative Extension should address in that county. But the role of the CEC in programming does not end with providing input. Instead, County Extension Councils should be either directly or indirectly involved in all phases of the program development process.

Generally, the County Extension Council as a whole will play the lead role in processes leading up to the identification of local program priorities. Then, design teams, 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 cut across program area boundaries. Program area advisory councils, such as the County 4-H, Agricultural Advisory, and the Family and Consumer Sciences Councils, provide leadership to the design, implementation, and evaluation of programs that address needs and issues related to their respective domain of programming. The County Extension Council coordinates the work of all of these groups to foster a comprehensive approach to program development.

County Extension Councils are composed of between 15 and 40 citizens of the county who can adequately represent the needs and interests of both existing client groups and the citizenry as a whole. To be adequately representative, membership should be a broad-based, cross-section of the people of the county. Members should represent all demographic and geographic segments as well as government, education, business, and community organizations. Each Extension program area advisory council should also be represented on the County Extension Council by delegates who bring issues from the program area councils and then report to them from the CEC as well.

Each County Extension Council should routinely conduct a self-assessment of its 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 on the council. Membership committees should help ensure the balance and representation needed to address broad based issue needs and client participation.

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. The Council's constitution and by-laws should specify a process of naming members, a fixed term length for members and officers, and a rotation pattern that ensures that as members end their terms, they do so at staggered intervals.

It is important to realize that each County Extension Council is a dynamic, changing, social entity. As members are added, the dynamics of the group change. As the size of the group increases, so does its complexity. Consequently, Extension agents and council members alike must possess strong group process skills if the County Extension Council is to function properly throughout the program development process.

Program Area Advisory Councils or Committees

Each agent is expected to have a program area advisory council or committee to support their respective area of programming. These councils send representatives to the County Extension Council to ensure that each program area plays a role in addressing high priority needs and issues identified by the CEC. Representatives of program area councils also communicate needs and issues of the program area to the broader County Extension Council. Program area advisory councils operate by the same principles and philosophies mentioned above.

Councils should adopt a committee structure to help ensure that work is done in an effective and efficient manner. Work should be done through a mixture of standing and ad hoc committees. Counties may organize their Plan of Work and programming efforts around MAP committees (Major Areas of Programming) or design teams and encourage participation based individual member's interests, abilities, connections, etc.

Informal Mechanisms

By living or working in the county they serve, county Extension agents develop a unique "feel" for the needs and wants of local citizens. They learn about the needs and issue of the community through routine contact with citizens. For example, routine farm and home visits, involvement with Homemakers during club meeting and parents and youth at 4-H events, as well as, trips to the local grocery store put Extension agents in contact with local citizens who will often stop to chat about their needs and issues. Agents may also learn about local issues and needs during visits they make to farms, homes, and schools. But sometimes agent interaction with citizens is more strategic in nature. For example, an Extension agent may seek membership in a particular community group such as Kiwanis, Lions Club or the Chamber of Commerce, or attend a community function for the sole purpose of building linkages with particular citizens or community leaders. Even a cup of coffee in a donut shop or fast food restaurant where community leaders congregate can serve as an excellent opportunity for strengthening linkages with the "movers and shakers" of the community. However, use of informal mechanisms should never be thought of as a substitute for having functioning advisory councils at the county level.

Multi-County, Regional, and State-Wide Programming

A cornerstone of Extension program development philosophy is the belief that programs are developed in accordance with local needs. However, many issues transcend county, district, regional, and even state boundaries. Consequently, multi-county, regional, state, and national programs are sometimes developed as a response to these common needs.

Counties with similar needs may choose to work together on their own accord to develop a programmatic response to a local need or issue. Such work across county lines is valued and encouraged. But a recent restructuring of Cooperative Extension within Kentucky provides additional support to such collaborative programming.

For programming purposes, Kentucky counties are assigned to one of three Extension regions. Regional Issues and Programming Committees (RIPCs) comprised of representatives of both field-based and on-campus personnel meet periodically throughout the year to discuss issues and needs identified by local County Extension Councils. County plans of work are an important mechanism for communicating these local needs and issues. Quick Response Teams then identify or develop resources that support programming focused on common needs and issues.

A State Extension Council helps establish state level program priorities and provides input on various policy, procedure, and resource issues.

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