

## County Plan of Work Development: Facilitating Issues Discussion and Prioritization

The County Extension Council (CEC) is an important contributor to the process of needs identification, situation analysis and prioritizing issues to be addressed. At the point of setting priorities, the County Extension Council members, program leaders, and staff have typically been engaged in gathering information and data to inform the process.

The question often becomes, "What do we do with all this information?" How do we share the data with the council? There are many more needs identified and program opportunities than can be addressed, so prioritization is essential.

This fact sheet provides ideas for presenting data to the County Extension Council and describes techniques which can be used for issues discussions and prioritization.

### PRESENTING DATA

Both the County Extension Agents and members of the County Extension Council should be involved in gathering data to provide an accurate picture of the county. The Extension Community Assessment is an important part of this process, and a variety of additional data sources are also available. Providing information which correlates the county within the state and nation helps clarify needs and issues locally.

All information gathered should be presented in an unbiased, straightforward and accurate manner. Individuals selected to present data should try to avoid letting personal views and beliefs interfere with presenting an accurate picture of the county. A County Extension Council that reflects broad representation in the backgrounds and experiences of its members helps assure a balanced interpretation of the local situation.

### *Charts and Graphs*

Pictures can tell a story. For many, the graphic presentation of numbers will more clearly communicate a need or issue. Microsoft Excel, PowerPoint or other software programs can be used to develop charts and graphs which make the data more easily understood. These may be presented in several ways: through digital presentations projected on screen, by creating an actual poster with graphs and charts, or via printed handouts with graphs and charts. Data visualizations can be captured from the Extension Community Assessment data dashboard. In addition, a variety of data profiles incorporating tables, charts and graphs are available for your use.

Counties should consider involving County Extension Council leaders or members in the process of identifying and selecting data sources and deciding how the data could be presented most effectively.



### **Quiz Formats**

Simple multiple-choice or true-false questions can also be used as presentation and teaching tools. If you write the questions and use related information as the alternatives in a multiple-choice format, it can provide a guide for presenting the data and making it more relevant. For example:

*What percent of the families in our county are below the poverty level?*

- A. 12%
- B. 16%
- C. 18%
- D. 22%

Answer: For this county the correct answer is “D.” Alternative “A” represents the US poverty level; “B” represents the State; and, “C” represents a neighboring county. A discussion of all alternatives would provide a clearer picture of the ranking of this county with respect to related entities.

### **Game Formats**

Creating a team trivia or game show format can be a useful technique in sharing information and facilitating learning. By creating your own game, you can share data and have fun in the process. Dividing the participants into groups and letting them identify answers creates a more supportive environment where individuals participate as teams. Quiz style presentations can be facilitated through the use of PowerPoint or other digital apps. Having simple, inexpensive prizes for winning teams can add to the fun for everyone.

## **MOVING FROM DATA TO PROGRAM OPPORTUNITIES**

Once you share data, the next logical question may be “What does all this data mean?” The task is to move from raw data to a meaningful grouping of needs and issues. In many ways, gathering data is the easy part. Putting it in context and giving a name to the issues and needs of the county can be more difficult and challenging.

The process of identifying program opportunities begins with the County Extension Council identifying the local needs and opportunities for programs based on the data presented and accompanying discussions. Once the list of needs and program opportunities has been generated, priorities must be set to provide parameters for a meaningful yet doable plan which focuses on major program thrusts. Criteria established by the CEC and Extension staff will guide the decision-making process.

### **Brainstorming**

The most frequently used technique for generating a list of ideas is brainstorming. (For more information, see the Brainstorming fact sheet at <https://psd.ca.uky.edu/files/brainstorming.pdf>.) Because the County Extension Council is provided with information collected through needs assessment and situation analysis, brainstorming is likely to produce a highly relevant list of program ideas. Facilitated correctly, brainstorming will involve all members of the group, even those reluctant to speak at public meetings. Descriptors of four approaches to brainstorming follow.

#### Whole Group Brainstorming Discussion

The steps below outline a whole-group open discussion approach to brainstorming.

1. **Clearly frame an open-ended question.** For example, From the data which has been presented to the Council, what are the educational needs for this county?
2. **Do not censure or make judgments about any ideas.** The goal is to generate as many ideas as possible. Do not comment on any ideas at this time.

3. **List all ideas generated on a flip chart or in a digital format.** Have one or two persons writing or transcribing ideas as quickly as they are shared. (Tip: When a flipchart page is three-fourths full, start a new page. It encourages the group to continue generating ideas.)
4. **Encourage hitchhiking.** Encourage people to add ideas that build or are generated by someone else's suggestions.
5. **Focus on quantity.** The more ideas generated the better. Often the best suggestions come in the last few minutes of a brainstorming activity.
6. **Stay loose.** Keep the environment free and supportive. Do not force people to participate.
7. **Draw to a close.** When discussion wanes or you reach the end of the allotted time, review the list of ideas to close out the discussion.

#### Individual Ideas, Whole Group Discussion

When working with large groups, there is often concern that some individuals may be reluctant to speak up and share their thoughts. This approach to brainstorming begins with individual, silent generation of ideas, followed by whole group discussion.

1. **Provide each person with a supply of sticky notes** (3" x 5" size or larger may work best).
2. **Pose a question for idea generation.** Ask council members/participants to think about the key issues in the community (from data shared and their personal perspectives) where Extension programming could have a positive impact. (If it would be beneficial to provide examples, include a few from the community assessment and/or recent program topics.)
3. **Focus on individual issues.** Direct each person to write each issue that comes to mind on an individual sticky note, up to 10 issues/sticky notes per person.
4. **Collect and collate issues.** Place all sticky notes on a wall, board or table – with 3-5 volunteers (potentially council officers working with one or more agents) who are grouping same/similar issues as the notes are posted.
5. **Create a master list.** Once the process of grouping common issues is completed, report out to the group providing an opportunity for clarifying comments. Identify a scribe who will capture a master list during the report out and discussion. This will result in a single list of potential programming thrusts derived with input from the full group.

#### Modified Brainstorming Utilizing Small Groups

In large groups it is often difficult to get everyone present to speak out or share their thoughts with others. The following modified brainstorming activity will create a smaller and more supportive environment which begins with silent generation of ideas.

1. **Divide the participants into small groups.** Groups of 5-7 are optimal.
2. **Begin with silent generation of ideas.** Individuals first work independently to generate their own list of program ideas. The facilitator instructs them to write the three ideas they feel most strongly about on sticky notes or index cards (3" x 5" or larger work best). Use a separate sheet or card for each idea.
3. **Share ideas.** Each individual shares one idea with the small group in round-robin fashion until all ideas are shared.
4. **Discuss and clarify.** Within the small group, discuss and clarify all ideas, allowing participants to explain further the ideas they shared. Remove duplications and cluster related ideas under key themes.
5. **Select ideas to share with larger group.** Each small group selects three or four ideas that all members support as programming priorities.
6. **Present ideas to larger group.** Ideas from small groups are presented in round-robin fashion to the larger group. Groups place their ideas (the original sheet or card the idea was written on or the new theme for clustered ideas) on a wall, board or flipchart sheet.

7. **Ideas are discussed and clarified within the larger group.** Duplications are removed. Related ideas can be clustered under a new heading and treated as a single programming thrust. What remains is a list of program opportunities derived from the collective wisdom of the group.

### Paired Brainstorming

1. **Determine pairings/trios.** Divide attendees into groups of two (no more than three) people each. To the extent possible, ensure each group includes a mix of program area representation.
2. **Generate initial ideas.** Provide each group with an 11" x 17" sheet of paper or flipchart sheet and markers. Give the groups 7-9 minutes to note key issues in the community (from data shared and their personal perspectives) where Extension programming could have a positive impact.
3. **Pair two groups together.** Ask these expanded groups (4-6 people each) to combine their issues lists, noting how many times each issue was mentioned. Groups should discuss common issues and combine/reword as needed.
4. **Combine groups again.** If you started with more than four pairs/trios, continue the funnel-down process by combining two expanded groups (8-12 people total). Ask these larger groups to again combine lists, noting how many times each issue was mentioned. Again, this will likely include small group discussion of common issues and reframing as needed.
5. **Combine again (if needed).** Continue the process of funneling to larger groups until you have two lists.
6. **Compile a single list.** Once you have combined to have two large groups and funneled to two lists, move to a report out phase. Alternate between the two larger groups to share an issue, discuss commonalities, and create a single index of needs and issues identified. *(Keeping track of how many of the initial pairs/trios noted each issue could serve as an initial step in prioritization.)*
7. **Final consensus.** Review the final list with the group, providing one last overall opportunity for comments and modifications.

### **ESTABLISHING PRIORITIES**

All four brainstorming approaches will result in a list of locally identified needs or issues – potential program opportunities. This list is likely to be quite long and may have more ideas than the county can address at this time. Priorities must be set to realistically lead to a significant impact. The selection priorities should be guided by criteria.

#### **Criteria**

The process of setting priorities begins with the examination of each identified need in light of a set of criteria that helps to determine either the magnitude of the issue or the prospects for making a difference with the issue. Some of the ideas generated from the brainstorming activity may be more relevant to Extension's educational mission than others. Thus, criteria must be developed to serve as a guide for setting priorities.

These criteria can include:

- The relative importance of the issue.
- The number of people affected.
- Political environment.
- History (i.e., Has this been addressed in the past? Are there implications from other programs?)
- Ability of Extension to respond.
- Interests of County Extension Council members.
- Culture of the county and communities.
- Efforts of other organizations and agencies.

In light of these criteria, some programming opportunities are more compelling than others. When individual council members apply the criteria, they will not come to the same conclusions regarding the priority of program ideas. Fortunately, there are several methods which can be used to set priorities that still allow every voice to be heard as the group makes decisions regarding high priority programming opportunities.

### ***Setting Priorities***

Since we cannot do everything, it is important to engage in a process to determine the program opportunities which are the highest priorities for your county. With the criteria in mind, the group engages in a process for determining program priorities they feel Extension should focus on during the next five years. Once decided, they become the **county emphases** for the next plan of work.

Utilizing a voting technique can narrow a lengthy list of issues to a smaller set of priorities. Several methods of voting are described below which can help groups narrow long lists into a prioritized grouping for the development of **county emphases**.

Simple Voting\* – Each member votes for the one item on the list they feel is the highest priority. After everyone has voted, the votes are counted and the items with the most votes are designated as highest priority.

Weighted Voting\* – With this approach, each person is allocated a set number of votes (i.e., 3, 5, 10, etc.). The individual can divide those votes however preferred – using all votes on a single issue or splitting them among multiple issues. This can be facilitated by providing each person with the set number of sticky dots or stars, then sharing the instructions for voting. Once everyone has voted, the votes are counted and the items with the highest vote totals are designated as top priorities.

Multi-Voting – In this approach, participants are allowed to vote for as many items as they wish. They may vote using a show of hands or colored dots or stars. Votes for each item are totaled and all items receiving votes from at least half the people voting are included in the next round. (Example: If 20 people vote, items receiving 10 (or more) votes are in the next round.) Everyone votes again. Each person is allowed to cast votes equal to half the number of items on the list. Repeat until there are six to ten items on the list. Discuss remaining ideas and selecting top priorities. (For more information, see the Multi-voting fact sheet at <https://psd.ca.uky.edu/files/multivot.pdf>.)

Nominal Group Technique<sup>1</sup> - This technique begins with silent brainstorming to generate program ideas. In round-robin fashion, each participant shares an idea until their list is depleted. Discuss all ideas. Share pros and cons. Similar ideas are grouped. Each member is then asked to rank order their top ten ideas, with ten being the highest ranking. This may be done directly on the flip chart sheet listing the ideas or on a 3" x 5" card. Rankings are totaled and ideas are ranked with the one receiving the highest total being the highest ranked. You may want to record the number of people who ranked each of the items. Discuss rankings and determine program priorities. (For more information, see the Nominal Group Technique fact sheet at <https://psd.ca.uky.edu/files/nominal.pdf>.)

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\*Both single voting and weighted voting can be facilitated digitally. Tools like Mentimeter (free or subscription version) offer this option. A designated scribe would type the final issues into an open-ended response Menti, one issue per line/box. Once all issues are added, then the scribe would launch voting. Participants would join at menti.com with the code provided and cast votes to identify top issues. The number of votes per respondent can be set at one for single voting or the number selected for weighted voting. Indicate within the digital platform if votes must be on different responses or if someone can vote multiple times for the same issue, then instruct participants accordingly. Once voting is complete, display results for the group.

## COUNTY EMPHASES

Once the priorities have been established, the Extension staff will have directions regarding the focus of future Extension programs. These high priority program thrusts will each be referred to as a **county emphasis**. Each county is expected to identify a reasonable number of emphases to align to the county needs and capacity. The number varies depending on such things as staff size and the scope of the emphases identified.

In some cases, counties may group one or more program thrusts identified by the County Extension Council into a single emphasis. Conversely, if the program thrusts are broad, it might be advisable to identify two emphases which will address the broader program need. When the final list of county emphases is created, local citizens should be able to clearly see how Extension programs are addressing the priorities they helped identify.

Considering each emphasis will help Extension staff organize their work into manageable pieces. Each emphasis will typically encompass all the work directed toward the achievement of one or more long-term outcomes. In addition, the name or title assigned to each emphasis will provide a useful framework for communicating with external audiences.

When naming each emphasis, consider the following questions:

- Does the name communicate an intended action?
- Will the name resonate with external stakeholders?
- Does the name accurately reflect the scope of programming included in the thrust?
- Is the name concise, meaningful and free from jargon?

Examples of emphasis titles that meet these criteria are: Improving Health Through Physical Activity, Enhancing Farm Profitability, Fostering Life Skill Development for Youth.

## MAKING A PUBLIC COMMITMENT TO ACTION

Making the general public aware of the overall Extension program is the responsibility of all Extension staff. Sometimes the public has relatively little information about the broad program directions guiding educational activities. Therefore, once the list of county emphases is finalized, it becomes important to publicly announce the new directions for Extension programs. Feature articles in local newspapers, direct mail flyers, or special editions of newsletters can all be used to announce the new program thrusts. Additionally, when reports are developed to highlight Extension's accomplishments, organize the report around the county's major emphases. These program thrusts become the Extension "sound bite" to communicate local needs and issues being addressed within the five-year timeframe.

Once again this is an appropriate place to further engage the County Extension Council in communicating major thrusts and building public support for program goals. The broader and more representative the CEC membership, the better able we are to offer relevant programs, promote and ensure participation and gain new partners for comprehensive educational efforts.

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Delbecq, L L., Van de Ven, A. H. and Gustafson, D. H. *Group Techniques for Program Planning: A Guide to Nominal Group and Delphi Processes*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman & Company, 1975.

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