

Characteristics of Creative County Extension Programs in Texas: Comparison of Administrative Perceptions to Observations in Identified Creative Programs

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Abstract

A study on creativity in Texas Cooperative Extension (TCE) was conducted in 2004 in response to increasing interests in creative thinking in academia and industry and the inclusion of creative requisites in county agent performance and promotion measures. State and mid-level TEC administrators were given an e-mail questionnaire to determine attributes of successful, creative programs. Seventeen creative programs identified by mid-level administrators were qualitatively examined through informal interviews. Perceptions by administrators were then compared to characteristics revealed through county agent program descriptions. Administrators recognized audience-related factors including reaching new audiences and addressing relevant issues. These were seen in the programs identified along with identification of a target audience. Administrators discussed using new, non-traditional methods. Program examination revealed the use of a variety of delivery methods, an activity-based component, and multiple teaching experiences in the form of a series or an intensive workshop. Effective program planning, including grassroots planning groups, evaluation, and sufficient time to plan and implement were seen in creative programs. Technology, marketing, and outside funding were identified at lower levels.

Introduction

In the latter part of the twentieth century, interest in creativity has increased in research and in applications of creative thinking in academia and industry (Baker, Rudd, & Pomeroy, 2001; Kвашny, 1982). Creativity is based on divergent thinking, looking at a multitude of ideas, and is sometimes confused with critical thinking which contrastingly centers on convergent thinking or eliminating unreasonable or seemingly impractical possibilities (Beyer, 1987). Creative Problem Solving (CPS) models stretch the imagination by alternating between divergent thinking and convergent thinking in each step (Parnes, 1992). In this manner, the CPS process is used to “increase the probability of the generation and implementation of more or deeper relevant interrelationships of the wealth of data our brains contains and continually absorbs” (Parnes, 1992, p. 134).

Theoretical Framework

Torrance’s (1966) classic definition described creativity as a natural human process of sensing incompleteness and/or disharmonies and then engaging in conscious or unconscious activities to resolve the tensions created by this incompleteness. Amabile (1983/1999) took a slightly different approach, explaining that creativity is most often seen in the form of an end product which must be viewed and evaluated contextually.

A product or response is creative to the extent that appropriate observers independently agree it is creative. Appropriate observers are those familiar with the domain in which the product was created or the response articulated. Thus, creativity can be regarded as the quality of products or responses judged to be creative by appropriate observers, and it can also be regarded as the process by which something so judged is produced. (Amabile 1983/1999, p. 206)

Creative value according to this definition requires worth not just by the creator, but also by peers, supervisors, team members, or field experts in the case of workplace applications. When creativity is defined as a product, the creative process results in an invention, a scientific theory, an improved product, a literary work, or a new design, etc (Torrance & Goff, 1989/1992).

“Creativity can be considered a function of knowledge, imagination, and behavior” (Parnes, 1992, p. 137). All must be present to maximize creativity. Parnes compared rearranging current knowledge into new patterns to a kaleidoscope. Individuals who achieve new ideas simply from information obtained from one’s senses mimic a teleidoscope which uses colors and images from outside to form new patterns. The human brain, however, uses both internal (knowledge) and external (sensory) data in creative problem solving to generate new patterns or ideas like a “kaleido-teleido-scope” (Parnes, 1992, p. 137).

Business leaders and managers currently face the challenge of not just releasing and nurturing creative talents, but also focusing them to achieve desired effects or results

(Groth & Peters, 1999), which Plesk (1997) termed “directed creativity.”

Creativity has also been recognized as an important attribute within the Cooperative Extension System (CES) since the mid 1980s with Warnock (1985) calling creativity “Extension’s Future” and noting that practically every major innovative extension program was preceded by creative thinking on the part of the researcher or the extension agent. The Futures Task Force to Extension’s Committee on Organization and Policy reported that Extension professionals needed a sense of vision, innovation, and/or creativity (Smith, 1988).

Texas Cooperative Extension (TCE) did not ignore the call to promote creativity. Document analysis revealed that creativity has been added as a performance measure noted in county agent performance appraisal instruments, career ladder promotion criteria, competency models, and in the TCE competency model (Womack, 2004). County extension agents are therefore required to be creative and/or innovative in order to excel within the organization. Adding such terminology to performance standards also necessitates defining creative program or creative work.

Purpose and Objectives

This research focused on the question, “What constitutes a creative county-level program?” Naturalistic inquiry and emergent design (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was used to examine extension administrators’ perceptions of characteristics of creative county-level programs and to compare them with observed characteristics of programs identified as creative. The study was therefore designed to determine a creativity standard for creative programming so that county agents can meet the performance expectations of their supervisors. This research was part of a larger study that also examined perceptions of the value of creativity to Extension along with promoters and inhibitors of creativity (Womack, 2004).

Methods

A census of mid-level and state administrators was conducted using a written questionnaire to determine administrative perspectives of creative programming because administrators evaluate individual performance of agents including creative requisites. State and mid-level administrators were asked to provide written answers to open-ended questions including “what makes a program creative?” Mid-level administrators were also asked to identify two programs which they considered to be both creative and successful, explain what makes them creative, and identify the lead agent(s). These responses provided an information-rich, purposeful sample to examine programs that met mid-level administrators’ creative expectations (Borg, Gall, & Borg, 1996; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Responses from state and mid-level administrators were randomly assigned an audit trail number beginning with the letters “S” and “M,” respectively. Questionnaires were sent electronically using pre-notification and follow-up procedures described by Dillman (2000) and responses were returned via e-mail, fax, postal mail, and telephone transcription of answers resulting in a 100% response rate.

Programs identified as creative were examined using “unstructured” or exploratory interviews conducted via telephone or Internet conferencing with the lead agents for those programs to identify common characteristics (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 269). The interviewer asked for elaboration until or used branching questions until the interviewer had an accurate understanding of the respondent’s thoughts or feelings. Sampling continued until redundancy of answers occurred (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Interviews were transcribed and subjected to member check procedures for accuracy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Responses from county agents were randomly assigned an audit trail number beginning with the letter “A.”

The written answers to administrative questionnaires and transcripts from county extension agent interviews were unitized and categorized by emergent themes according to accepted qualitative means of naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Berg, 1998). Data from the two sources were then compared to other data sources including organizational reports, literature, and other documents using triangulation to ensure trustworthiness of the data sources (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

The descriptions by administrators continuing to identify specific criteria they commonly associated with creative programs. The descriptions by county agents who were responsible for creative programs as identified by administrators were also examined to compare characteristics. Table 1 compares the administrative expectations to the actual characteristics of creative programs identified through county agent interviews.

A wide range of adjectives were used by both administrators and county agents to describe “creative” programs. Although administrators were directly asked “what makes a program creative,” responses from county extension agents were derived from descriptions of their respective program and how creativity related to the planning process. Descriptors of creative programs and/or their components were “new,” “unusual,” “original,” “innovative,” and “out of the box.” Although not specifically asked to define creativity, county agents also used “out of the box” to describe creative programs.

Table 1. *Perceptions of Common Characteristics of Creative Programs*

Characteristics	Administrators	Agents
Audience Factors		
Target Audience	.41	.94
New Audiences/Broad Appeal	.81	.67
Audience Convenience Factor	.03	.59
Program Planning		
Relevant issue	.43	.77
“Grassroots” planning group	.32	.59
Evaluation / program planning model	.22	.47
Time to plan & implement	.32	.77
Outcome program	—	.24
Interdisciplinary program	—	.35
Delivery methods		
New, non-traditional method(s)	.43	.77
Multiple delivery methods	.16	.88
Activity-based component	.03	.82
Technology component	.14	.29
Multi-generational component		.29
Bilingual component	—	.17
Educational program series	—	.65
Workshop or conference	—	.18
Collaboration	.11	.94
Catchy name or logo	.03	.59
Marketing component	.24	.47
Outside funding and grants	.35	.53
Teamwork (staff/volunteers)	.32	.41

The most common description reported by administrators was the belief that an idea or subject did not have to necessarily be new, but could be presented with a different method that departs from routine. Typical quotes within this theme described creative programs as “any program that departs from traditional approaches, yet adheres to sound research-based methodology and subject matter” (M8), or using a “non-traditional approach to teaching a traditional audience” (M20), by “putting new/fresh approaches on old, familiar programs” (M21). Similarly, more than one-half of the agents agreed with

administrators that creative programming did not have to be a new program, but strictly a new twist on materials.

Some of the programs submitted initially did not provide much insight into what made the program creative. A peer reviewer with expertise in extension program development and evaluation noted that eleven of the forty-two programs nominated by the initial response deadline appeared to very effective or successful but not necessarily creative based on his interpretation of the administrators' explanations. Descriptors of "effective," "productive," or "quality" attached to programs with little or no explanation about its creative characteristics suggested confusion by some mid-level administrators between an "effective" and a "creative" program, possibly using the terms synonymously at times.

Identified characteristics fell within broad themes related to audience factors, program planning process, delivery methods, and other considerations. Analysis of the data revealed that creative programs effectively used one or more of the following components of the program planning process: audience identification, needs assessment, grassroots planning, and evaluation.

Audience-related characteristics, including audience identification and attracting new audiences, were common responses in descriptions of creative programs for both administrators and county agents. Identification of a target audience was a characteristic described in 94% of the creative programs examined; however, only 19% of administrators specifically used the words "target audience" when explaining attributes of creative programs. Other administrators described creative programs as satisfying the specific needs of an audience, which was interpreted as the concept of a target audience within explanations about the value of creative programs. A similar characteristic identified by 67% of administrators as an element of creative programs was attracting new audiences or having broad appeal. Audience convenience factors like special locations, weekend and evening times, and Internet access to information were noted in 59% of the programs, but only one administrator acknowledged the importance of this factor by suggesting that creative programs be "user-friendly" (M31).

Program planning characteristics identified by both administrators and seen in program examinations included addressing relevant issues, grassroots planning, evaluation and program evolution, and adequate time to plan and implement creative programs. Issue-based programming was a criterion for effective creative programs according to 43% of administrators; it was also observed in 77% of the programs examined.

Grassroots involvement is one of the cornerstones of accepted program planning models in Extension. Grassroots planning was specifically mentioned as a characteristic or as a promoter of creative programs by 32% of administrators.

I think most creative and successful programs are identified and developed through local committees that are very familiar with the issue to be addressed, but have very little knowledge of how traditionally Extension or other groups

addressed similar issues. . . . committees should have a variety of personality types to stimulate new ideas and creative solutions. (M23)

Similarly, 53% of county agent responses also revealed the importance of grassroots committee planning. According to county agents, committees provided a plethora of viewpoints during the program planning process. Agents related that effective committees can bring in “new blood and new ideas, new thoughts of how to do things or what to do” (A6). If an agent can “take some of those ideas and merge them, [they] can really produce some outstanding creativity” (A3). Simply having a committee did not appear to be sufficient, but having the “right” members on that committee was identified as equally important. Committees were also recognized as an inhibitor when they are steeped in tradition and resist change.

If you have committees that have been around for twenty or thirty years, . . . unless they themselves are very . . . active and open to new ideas, then I think that’s going to make it hard for you to do your work or maybe to identify areas where you can maybe branch out (A9).

Another similar way to increase the divergent thinking and to keep programs relevant is by “making sure you’re in contact with the people who need it” (A5), which may include “going out and mingling with people in the industry” (A15). A creative agent stays relevant by

paying attention to trends . . . [and] what people are seeking and looking for . . . a whole lot of that we’ve got to get from asking people. They’ll tell you . . . what they want . . . it’s just a matter of figuring out a way of adapting what they are telling you into a program” (A10).

One agent explained part of his needs assessment process: “I polled a bunch of [target audience] and asked them, ‘What do you need from Extension? What are your greatest needs and how can we help?’ which is always a dangerous thing to do, but they were very responsive” (A16).

Program evolution and adaptability often occurs through effective use of evaluation. Evaluation allows for improvement in ongoing or repeated programs, a characteristic of 84% of the programs examined. Planning and implementing such improvements requires additional time. For example, agents reported that additional planning was required of interdisciplinary and annually required outcome-based programs.

Incorporating innovative, unique, or non-traditional methods was mentioned by 43% of administrators (e.g.) “Usually it is not that the information is particularly new, but that a new way of presenting it is utilized” (M17). However, administrators did not define terms like “unique” or “non-traditional” nor did they give examples.

A common characteristic seen in the 88% of the creative programs examined was use of multiple delivery methods within a program. A plethora of learning experiences was identified including use of lecture, demonstration, field trips and tours, hands-on

experimentation, self-directed projects, case studies and investigation, medical tests and results interpretation, newsletters, Web sites, mentoring, public speaking, and community service. A common thread in delivery methodology, however, was active-learning or hands-on experiences which were identified as a critical component in 82% of the programs. Technology was mentioned as a common element in creative programs by only 14% of administrators and only 24% of examined programs identified a technology component. Other methodology characteristics that were seen at much lower frequencies included a multi-generational facet and a bilingual component.

Another common theme found in most of the identified programs was the use of multiple learning experiences and not strictly single presentations. An educational program series was used in 65% of the creative programs studied. Intensive study with multiple presentations and experiences through a conference, retreat, or short-term camp were used in an additional 18% of the programs.

Collaboration was present in 94% of the programs examined but not identified as a characteristic by administrators specifically. Other characteristics were less common. A marketing component was identified by administrators, including such things as a catchy logo or name in 59% and special marketing/promotional efforts used by 42% of the programs examined. Grant support of outside funding was noted by 35% of administrators and in 53% of the programs. Teamwork including support by co-workers and/or volunteers was identified by 32% of administrators and in 41% of the programs (Table 1).

Conclusions

The researchers observed from written responses that state administrators generally provided more complete explanations of what makes a program creative and appeared to have a broader understanding of creativity's value on multiple levels. Few mid-level administrators were able to provide clear, concise answers to "what makes a program creative." The variety within answers suggested that creative expectations are poorly defined for county agents and vary depending on their supervisor. Some of the programs initially submitted did not provide much insight into what made the program creative by the mid-level administrators' descriptions. A peer reviewer with experience in extension programming and evaluation noted eleven of the forty-two programs that were nominated by the initial response deadline appeared to be very effective or successful, but not necessarily creative based on his interpretation of the administrators' explanations. Those observations coupled terminology confusion and the use of descriptors like "effective," "productive," and "quality" by 22% of administrators suggests that some mid-level administrators might have difficulty deciphering between creative and successful programs.

The terms "new," "unusual," "original," or "different" were used to describe an overall program, approach, or method. However, 70% of administrators and 53% of county agents recognized that a creative program may not have new subject matter but is being delivered using a new method that departs from routine or tradition.

Administrators may need to identify a list of “traditional” delivery methods (i.e., lecture, visual demonstration) to provide a benchmark for identifying methodologies considered to be “creative,” “innovative,” or “non-traditional.”. Extension literature supports the use of innovative program delivery methods (Taylor-Powell & Richardson, 1990) and new approaches and tools to improve Extension’s effectiveness (Warner, 1993).

Program planning models provide a framework for creating a successful, relative educational program with measurable impacts. Administrators’ descriptions of creative program criteria mirrored elements commonly found in widely accepted extension program planning models.

Use of committees and grassroots efforts in program planning was one of the key components discussed by both administrators and agents for an influx of ideas. When used effectively, committees and task forces provide the source for divergent thinking during program planning and allow Extension to bring in the ideas and resources of collaborators. These findings are supported by Parnes’ (1992) “kaleido-teleido-scope” effect where new patterns and combinations are made from both internal and/or external elements.

A creative program incorporates innovative, unique, or non-traditional methods according to 43% of administrators. One mid-level administrator explained, “Most often when we think of creative programming it is the delivery methods that are creative” (M17). That statement aligns with performance appraisal measures requiring “creative and innovative methods” (Texas Agricultural Extension Service, 2000, p. 20). However, because less than one-half of administrators identified delivery methods as a characteristic of creative programs, one might wonder if the administrators consciously recognize that using creative and innovative program delivery methods is one of the evaluation standards for county agents.

A variety of delivery methods were used in the seventeen programs examined with most using multiple methods. The use of active learning seen in 65% of creative programs may suggest that traditional methods may be more passive delivery practices including lectures and distribution of printed publications and newsletters.

Although technology is specifically mentioned in performance appraisal standards, technology use was not prevalent in program descriptions. However, concerns were voiced by both administrators and agents that Extension may be behind the technology adoption levels of clientele. It was also noted that providing clientele with more on-line learning experiences might help Extension appear technologically savvy and relevant. Technology was also suggested as a venue to provide information to computer-literate clientele who seek assistance after traditional work hours. Concerns were voiced about potential clientele going elsewhere for information if they could not find it on-line on demand. Therefore, it might be beneficial to incorporate technology as one of the multiple methods in programs to assist Extension in meeting its mission to provide quality, relevant outreach and continuing education programs and service to the people of Texas. Texas Cooperative Extension should carefully examine the best

applications of technology to meet the needs of clientele.

Collaboration is another performance standard, but was absent in the descriptions of creative program criteria by administrators. One or more major collaborators were identified in 94% of the creative programs examined. Collaborators provided facilities, financial support, personnel support, or significant assistance in planning. The lack of administrative acknowledgment may stem from collaboration being a performance standard and thus assumed to be part of programs; however, its appearance in the vast majority of programs studied warranted its inclusion in creative programming criteria.

Marketing and promotion was identified as a component or promoter of creative programs by 22% of mid-level administrators and was seen in 47% of the programs. Targeted marketing and specific promotional components may be considered creative due to deviation from traditional Extension program promotion. Creativity and divergent thinking may help to expand the marketing efforts of all extension programs. This conclusion was supported by the report of the TAEX Urban Task Force Subcommittee on Expansion which recommended finding readily identifiable banner programs along with an internal and external marketing plan (Texas Agricultural Extension Service, 2001).

The researchers also noted that program development models provided the framework for creating a successful, relevant educational program with measurable impacts in the creative programs examined. Administrators' descriptions mirrored elements (i.e., issue identification, target audience identification, grassroots planning, and evaluation) commonly found in widely accepted extension program development models.

Use of committees and grassroots efforts in program planning was one of the key components discussed by both administrators and agents for an influx of ideas. When used effectively, committees and task forces provide the source for divergent thinking during program planning and allow Extension to bring in the ideas and resources of collaborators. These findings are supported by Parnes' (1992) "kaleido-teleido-scope" effect where new patterns and combinations are made from both internal and external elements.

Recommendations and Implications

The linkage between creative programming and successful or effective programming is a natural association for administrators and managers who are looking at productivity as one of the measures of the organization. Extension administrators face the same challenges as industry leaders and managers, of not just releasing and nurturing creative talents, but also focusing them to achieve desired effects or results (Groth & Peters, 1999). However, guidelines that distinguish creative from simply traditional, successful programs should be further clarified since agent performance and promotion measures are specifically linked to creative programs.

Diverse delivery methodologies were reported to be a key element of creative programs. In an effort to identify creative methodologies, providing a list of specific

creative techniques might actually limit creativity; a better approach could be to create a list of methods that are typically considered traditional (i.e., lecture, visual demonstration, etc.). TCE should assist county agents in divergent thinking exercises associated with programming. For example, recognizing creative programs or having agents share their creative programming success stories may spark new ideas or approaches for educational programs for other county agents and thus promote creativity within the organization.

Creativity should be promoted within the organization since creative products are required of employees according to performance and promotion measures. Furthermore, creativity appears to be linked to organizational and professional excellence according to responses by administrators, agents, and selected literature reviewed (Groth & Peters, 1999).

As agents pointed out during interviews, many creative programs already exist in counties, but concerns are still apparent that agents may be stretched too thin. The ability to produce exceptional extension programs will not come from expecting miracle performance in increasingly demanding situations, but when agents are provided the time and resources needed to adequately develop creative programs and exercise their own unique creative potentials.

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