

AN ANALYSIS OF OUTCOMES ASSOCIATED WITH CONDUCTING COUNTY PROGRAM REVIEWS IN COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

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Abstract

Upholding and improving the quality of its educational programs has been a continuing priority for Cooperative Extension. The purpose of this study was to identify the outcomes resulting from conducting county program reviews in Florida. Extension agents in eight counties that participated in a 2008 county program review were surveyed to determine if their participation had affected their programming knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. The results indicated agents increased knowledge of their programs' strengths and opportunities for improvement. Most agents took at least one programming action as a result of participating in the county program review, with an increased use of technology reported as the most common action taken. Fewer actions were reported at the county level. Taking action was related to an agent's perception of KASA outcomes. The county program reviews have demonstrated potential to be a positive mechanism for improving programs. UF/IFAS Extension can maximize this value by communicating the importance of the county program reviews to agents and county offices, and by holding both accountable for their actions after a county program review.

Introduction

Educational programs are the identifying brand of Cooperative Extension. The Extension Committee on Organization and Policy's Leadership Advisory Council (2007) said enhancing the success of educational programs is an internal and external priority for Extension. The development of Extension programs is influenced by identified needs or current events (Lopez et al., 1999). Assessments of its educational programs may determine organizational changes within Extension (ECOP LAC, 2006). Rasmussen (1989) said the majority of Extension programs are first identified as a need on the local level and are carried out by the organization to meet the needs of citizens. Extension's educational programs are available to anyone who wishes to participate.

According to Kistler and Briers (2003), Extension programs should be continuously evaluated in order to measure quality and program impact. This is consistent with the National Research Agenda (Osborne, n.d.) which identified the need to examine appropriate nonformal educational delivery systems. Towards this end a formal needs assessment process, known as a county program review, was re-instituted in Florida in 2007 to improve the quality of Extension programming delivered at the county level (Benge & Harder, 2009). Jacob, Israel, and Summerhill (1998) described county program reviews as "a comprehensive assessment of the program delivery and educational services offered by the faculty and staff of a local Extension office" (§ 1). Counties are selected by the extension administration to participate in county program reviews. Review teams of county and state extension faculty are formed based on technical expertise and the major program areas in the selected counties. The teams receive training at a workshop to increase each team member's knowledge of his/her role and the overall review process.

The selected counties participate in a two to four day review, based on the size of their county extension program. Faculty and staff in each program area and its corresponding stakeholders have a scheduled opportunity to dialogue with the review team. The review team also meets with a county administrator (e.g., county commissioner) during their visit.

The review teams are charged with developing a final report outlining the county's overall strengths, challenges, opportunities, and threats based on their observations and interactions with county faculty, staff, stakeholders, and county administration. Each individual program area is provided feedback regarding strengths and opportunities. Each county office is required to draft a response and subsequent plan of action based on the results of the review.

Maintaining quality programs is critically important for an organization such as Cooperative Extension because of the role that its continuing education programs play in the betterment of society. Boyle (1981) stated: "It is up to the professional leadership of continuing education to provide [lifelong learning opportunities]; otherwise, we face the prospect of having large numbers of citizens permanently restricted in their ability to grow" (p. 3). This article describes research conducted to identify the outcomes resulting from the county program review process in Florida. The results from this study will provide a foundation for understanding the effectiveness of the county program review process as a means for improving extension program

quality, which may prove informative not only for Florida but for other state extension systems interested in program improvement.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

In their Targeting Outcomes of Programs (TOP) Model, Rockwell and Bennett (2004) theorized changes in knowledge, attitudes, skills, and aspirations (KASA) have to occur prior to changes in practice. According to Bennett and Rockwell, “practices are patterns of behaviors, procedures, or actions” (1995, ¶ 16). Practice changes may ultimately lead to changes in social, economic, or environmental conditions (Bennett & Rockwell). Although the TOP Model was originally developed to describe the outcomes of educational programs, it is useful to assess KASA and practice outcomes in order to understand how individuals and organizations respond following other change strategies, such as needs assessments.

The conceptual model (see Figure 1) for the study was developed by Harder et al. (2009) from Boyle’s (1981) adaptation of field theory and the work of English and Kaufman (1975), Witkin and Altschuld (1995), and McLean (2006). Changes in the environment may sometimes create disequilibrium for the individual when what is currently happening differs from what an individual perceives to be ideal (Boyle). English and Kaufman (1975) and Witkin and Altschuld (1995) advocated the use of needs assessments as a systematic method of determining individual and organizational needs. McLean (2006) said the potential exists for positive and negative results to occur following a needs assessment.

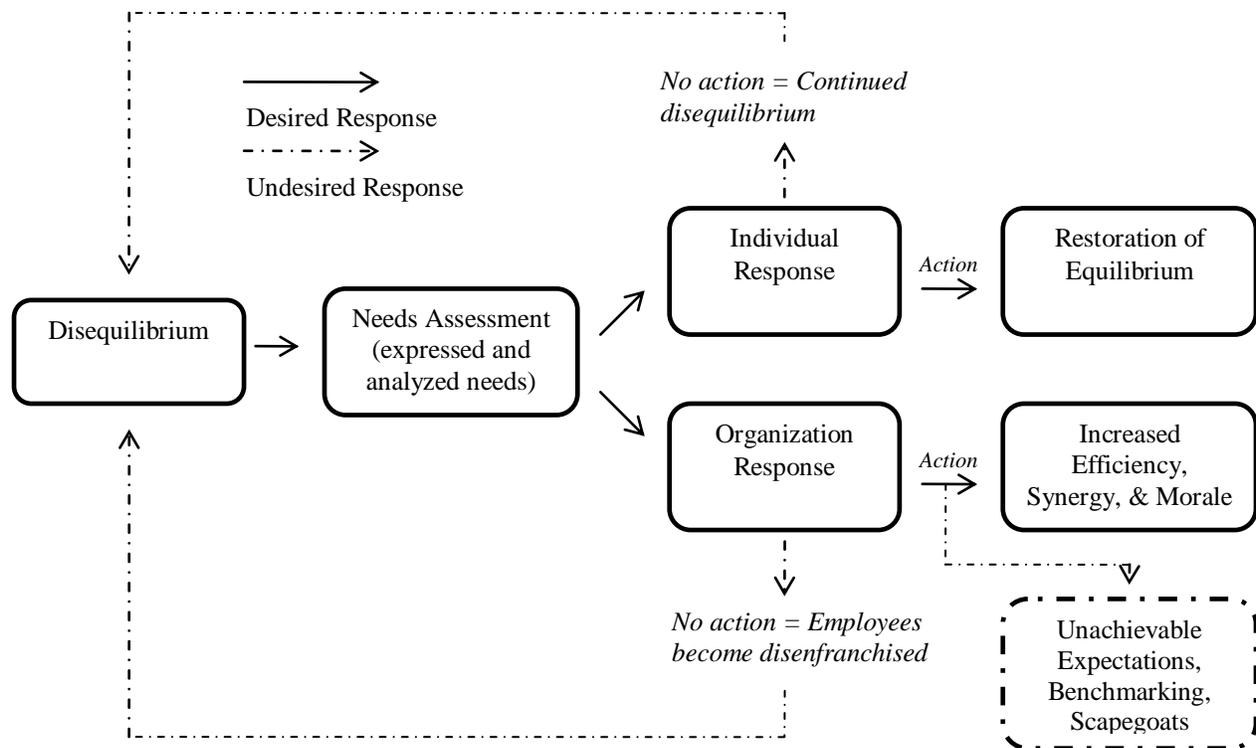


Figure 1. Model for the needs resolution process (Harder et al., 2009).

Note. From “An analysis of the priority needs of Cooperative Extension at the county level,” by A. Harder, A. Lamm, and R. Strong, 2009, *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 50(3), p. 13. Reprinted with permission.

In the context of this study, changes in KASA were examined to help determine why extension agents and county offices did or did not take action (change practice) following their participation in a county program review. The results should provide insight into the potential for achieving long-term positive or negative outcomes for the counties as a result of participating in a county program review.

Purpose/Objectives

The purpose of this study was to identify the outcomes resulting from the county program review process in Florida. The first objective was to describe how extension agents perceived potential changes in their knowledge or attitudes resulting from participating in a county program review. The second objective was to describe the actions that extension agents took as a result of participating in a county program review. The third objective was to describe the actions taken at the county level as a result of participating in a county program review. The fourth objective was to determine if differences existed in actions taken based on KASA changes.

Methods/Procedures

This study used a mixed method approach. Eight counties were purposively selected by UF/IFAS Extension administration to participate in the 2008 county program reviews. The extension agents working in those eight counties were surveyed approximately one year later. Seventy-five agents were still employed in the same counties when this study was collected, according to each county’s Web site and the university’s Cooperative Extension directory. Nine agents were no longer employed by Extension or in the same counties.

A researcher-developed questionnaire was used to collect data online using Survey Monkey. An expert panel reviewed it for content validity. Questions were developed based on Rockwell and Bennett’s (2004) Targeting Outcomes of Programs (TOP) model.

The first section of the questionnaire asked agents to indicate their level of agreement for five Likert-type questions about KASA outcomes resulting from the county program reviews by using a six point scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 2 = *Somewhat Disagree*, 3 = *Slightly Disagree*, 4 = *Slightly Agree*, 5 = *Somewhat Agree*, 6 = *Strongly Agree*). The scale was interpreted as follows: *Strongly Disagree* = 1.00 – 1.50, *Somewhat Disagree* = 1.51 – 2.50, *Slightly Disagree* = 2.51 – 3.50, *Slightly Agree* = 3.51 – 4.50, *Somewhat Agree* = 4.51 – 5.50, *Strongly Agree* = 5.51 – 6.00. Reliability for this section was calculated *ex post facto* at .91. The second section of the questionnaire contained two open-ended questions: (a) what changes did you make in your programs as a result of the county program review, and (b) what changes were made within your county office as a result of the county program review? A limitation of the study is the use of self-reporting.

Dillman, Smyth, and Christiansen's (2009) Tailored Design Method for Internet questionnaires was used to collect data. One reminder was sent in an effort to increase response rate (Dillman et al., 2009). The American Association for Public Opinion Research's (2008) guidelines for reporting response rates were used. Response Rate 1, the most conservative estimate of response rate, was 57.50%. In accordance with AAPOR guidelines, the disposition codes used to determine this response rate have been included in Table 1. No significant differences existed between early and late respondents when their quantitative responses were compared, therefore the quantitative results can be generalized to the target population (Lindner, Murphy, & Briers, 2001).

Table 1
Disposition codes used to calculate response and outcome rates

Disposition Type	Final Disposition Code	<i>n</i>
Interview (Category 1)		
Complete	1.00	42
Partial	1.20	0
Eligible, non-interview (Category 2)		
Breakoff/Implicit refusal	2.12	8
Unknown eligibility, non-interview (Category 3)		
Nothing returned	3.19	20
Mail returned undelivered		3
Not eligible (Category 4)		
Out of sample – other strata than originally coded	4.10	2

Note. Cooperation Rate 1 = 84.00%. Refusal Rate 1 = 11.00%. Contact Rate 1 = 68.50%.

Descriptive statistics were used for the first objective. Content analysis was used for the second and third objectives. According to Merriam (1989), content analysis “involves the simultaneous coding of raw data and the construction of categories that capture relevant characteristics of the document’s content” (p. 160). Triangulation was accomplished by having multiple investigators participate in the qualitative data analysis and a member check was conducted by e-mailing the results of the survey to respondents. An audit trail has been included in the findings/results. These steps were taken to increase the trustworthiness of the study, as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

The non-parametric Mann-Whitney *U* test was used for the fourth objective, due to the small group sizes. Respondents’ mean scores for the five KASA statements were used to determine if a significant difference existed between respondents categorized as “taken action” or “no action.” Only individual level, not county level, responses were considered for categorization. Level of significance was determined *a priori* at .05.

Results/Findings

Objective One: KASA Outcomes

The first objective was to describe how extension agents perceived potential KASA outcomes resulting from participating in a county program review (see Table 2). Agents somewhat agreed participating in a county program review helped them to recognize the strengths of their programs ($M = 4.52, SD = 1.19$). Agents slightly agreed participating in a county program review: increased their awareness of opportunities to strengthen their programs ($M = 4.24, SD = 1.19$), increased their awareness of challenges affecting their county's ability to deliver educational programming ($M = 4.05, SD = 1.25$), helped improve programming in their counties ($M = 3.95, SD = 1.29$), and increased their knowledge of threats facing their county's ability to deliver educational programming ($M = 3.60, SD = 1.34$).

Table 2
Agents' perceptions of KASA outcomes

Statement	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
The County Program Review helped me to recognize the strengths of my programs.	4.52	1.19
I increased my awareness of opportunities to strengthen my programs as a result of the County Program Review.	4.24	1.19
I increased my awareness of challenges affecting my county's ability to deliver educational programming as a result of the County Program Review.	4.05	1.25
I believe the County Program Review process helped improve programming in my county.	3.95	1.29
The County Program Review increased my knowledge of threats facing my county's ability to deliver educational programming.	3.60	1.34

Note. Scale: 1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 2 = *Somewhat Disagree*, 3 = *Slightly Disagree*, 4 = *Slightly Agree*, 5 = *Somewhat Agree*, 6 = *Strongly Agree*.

Objective Two: Individual Actions

The second objective was to describe any actions that extension agents took as a result of participating in a county program review. Twenty-nine agents took at least one action. Seven agents indicated they had not taken any new actions following the county program review. The themes that emerged from the content analysis are presented in italics for emphasis.

The most prevalent action taken was an *increased use of technology*. Web sites were improved with more educational information (R14), general maintenance and the addition of a blog (R3). One agent indicated he/she made “more use of the website” (R10) while another did a “better job of making my advisory committee [*sic*] aware of my website” (R12). Agents also increased their use of other technologies. An agent stated “I am in the process of changing some of the delivery methods, primarily by incorporating new technologies (Podcasts, narrated PowerPoints) into programing [*sic*]” (R34). Another agent stated “The biggest change was a

shift towards the exploration [of] how distance delivery technology can help in the delivery as well as the evaluation of my programs” (R42).

Agents reported *focusing their programs* as a result of participating in a county program review. Two agents (R2, R13) reported an increased focus on specific topics for their programs while another respondent (R25) decreased the number of environmental programs being offered. Similarly, an agent reported structuring “programs to suit very specific audiences” (R5). A different approach was taken by the agent (R26) who did not focus programs based on topics or audience, but rather was able to focus programming by incorporating measurable objectives.

An increased emphasis on diversity was evident. The emphasis included tracking the race and gender of program participants (R17) and changing press releases “to better feature affirmative action statements” (R19). Programmatically, agents reported planning “more programs in rural areas of the county” (R22), “increasing the number of non-traditional programs” (R23), and looking for “more opportunities for minority programming” (R30). Finally, the same agent who talked about changing press releases indicated he/she was also “searching for members of our advisory committee that will make it more culturally diverse” (R19).

An increased focus on advisory councils was the last of the common actions identified. Two agents made membership changes by establishing a membership rotation (R16) and adding a new member (R31). One agent “worked more with [my] advisory committee to identify program needs” (R14). The most intensive focus was evidenced by the respondent (R29) who reported:

We held a TOTAL Advisory Committee [meeting] - with ALL advisory committee members invited to a dinner after the Review. They discussed the Review Teams Recommendations & provided timeframes for implementation. I will be forced :-) [sic] to review their recommendations. Our 2nd annual (now) Total Advisory meeting will be in August. I believe this effort is worthwhile and will keep me on task.

Objective Three: County Level Actions

The third objective was to describe any actions taken at the county level as a result of participating in a county program review. Fourteen agents listed at least one action taken by their office. Ten agents indicated they did not know of any actions taken or that their office had not taken any actions. The themes that emerged from the content analysis are presented in italics for emphasis.

Improved office communication was the primary theme that emerged from the analysis of actions taken. One agent reported “There were more collaborations of programs throughout the office as a result of the review” (R18). Another agent stated “We are more aware now of each other’s programmatic [sic] efforts and see more of a big picture of the overall extension effort in the county” (R25). Communication with clientele improved in at least one office, according to the agent who reported “Clientele were directed to the correct contact person more frequently” (R5).

To a lesser extent, actions were taken to *increase marketing and visibility*. One county added a new office in the southern end of the county to better market its programs to the growing population in that area (R1). Another county “developed a marketing strategy and publication” (R26). Finally, an agent reported his/her office had “focused more on being visible and accesable [*sic*] to all of our very diverse county demographics” (R34).

Objective Four: Differences in KASA

The fourth objective was to determine if differences existed in actions taken based on KASA changes. Respondents who reported taking action following the county program review tended to slightly agree ($M = 4.37, SD = .84$) they had improved KASA outcomes while respondents who had not taken action tended to slightly disagree ($M = 3.47, SD = 1.28$). The two sets of means were statistically different ($U(1) = 105.50, Z = -2.42, p < .05$).

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to understand the outcomes resulting from conducting a county program review in Florida. KASA (Rockwell & Bennett, 2004) changes were observed. Agents tended to believe the county program review process helped improve programming in their counties.

Changes in practice (Rockwell & Bennett, 2004) also resulted from the county program reviews and were related to agents' perceptions of KASA outcomes. The most common actions taken by agents were categorized as: increased technology use, focusing programs, increased emphasis on diversity, and increased focus on advisory councils. The most common actions taken by county offices were categorized as improved office communication and increased marketing and visibility efforts. Fewer agents reported changes in practice at the county level versus individual program changes.

Implications

Witkin and Altschuld (1995) said the results of a needs assessment may be used to help move an organization towards its desired results. In the case of the county program reviews, the desired results are improved educational programs. This study showed agents appeared to gain a sufficient enough amount of knowledge during the county program review to prompt them to take actions to improve their programs. Most agents took at least one action, suggesting the county program reviews can stimulate agents to change their programming practices.

The needs resolution model developed by Harder et al. (2009) indicated there are individual and organizational benefits that may result when action is taken following a needs assessment. At the individual level, equilibrium is restored. Though this study did not explicitly seek to understand what the restoration of equilibrium means for an agent, it is logical to presume agents only took those actions they perceived to be beneficial. This is a promising finding as the organizational structure of Extension places the greatest amount of responsibility for educational program quality on the individual agent.

A lesser degree of effectiveness can be attributed to the effect that the county program reviews have at the organizational level. Only 35% of the responding agents indicated their offices had taken any kind of action following the county program review. That means the potential organizational benefits derived from conducting a needs assessment, such as the county program reviews, are going largely unrealized in the counties (Harder et al., 2008; McLean, 2006). County offices are missing opportunities to increase overall efficiency, synergy, and morale if they fail to act upon the results of the county program reviews. A potentially more serious consequence is that employees may become disenfranchised if they believe the county program review process is not valued by the organization, as evidenced by a lack of organizational action. Disenfranchised employees will not be positive assets in the effort to increase educational program quality and may be less likely to sustain any positive changes in practice they made as individuals.

Similarly, this study found that agents with positive perceptions of their KASA outcomes were more likely to adopt new practices than agents with negative perceptions. This is consistent with Bennett and Rockwell (1995), who said changes in practice are unlikely to take place if program participants do not gain enough knowledge and skills or form the appropriate attitudes and aspirations. It is troubling to find that agents' personal perceptions can interfere with their adoption of practices that have been formally recommended to improve their program quality. UF/IFAS Extension must find a way to increase agents' perceptions of KASA outcomes if it is to achieve its goal of program improvement.

Recommendations

More research is needed regarding the effectiveness of conducting county program reviews as a method for improving the quality of educational programs. This study used self-reporting to measure the objectives; future studies may benefit from a more rigorous research design. The findings from this study show promising changes in practice at the individual levels, but it is too soon to know if these changes in practice will be sustainable. Research is needed to understand the long-term effects of the county program reviews. At the individual and organizational levels, research is needed to understand the barriers to taking action following the county program review.

Recommendations for practice are focused on encouraging agents and county offices to take action following participation in a county program review. The majority of agents and offices must "buy-in" to the value of the county program reviews in order for them to have long-term impact. While offices are supposed to outline plans for implementing the county program review recommendations in a written response, this has not always happened. UF/IFAS Extension administrators must consistently communicate the importance of the county program reviews and hold agents and offices accountable for developing *and* implementing strategic plans. Doing so will be key to realizing the full benefits of the county program review process.

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