

# Accountability in Extension

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Every Extension professional with a USDA appointment is acquainted with accountability via EMIS/SEMIS. The authors discuss the advantages of the system, point out some of its deficiencies, and suggest ways to strengthen and improve it.

How does Extension account to its funding bodies for the funds it uses? In terms of gaining support of legislative bodies, its success can be measured by their response to Extension's request for funds. Aside from the expanded nutrition program, new funds have been limited during the past 10 years. Public service agencies and organizations, especially those supported by public funds, are finding themselves in the age of accountability.

This article discusses why the need for accountability in Extension is greater and more important than ever before, and what Extension is or should be doing to meet this need.

## Need for Accountability

Competition for public funds is nothing new for Extension. However, the loss of former allies in Congress to defend Extension requests is getting more critical each session. Extension backers with rural orientation are being replaced by

urban-oriented representatives who have clientele with subject-matter needs other than those traditionally served by Cooperative Extension.

In the 60s, legislative bodies at all levels began to demand accountability, not only for new funds but for funds already in hand. This situation is illustrated by the fact that nationally the size of the Cooperative Extension staff hasn't changed much since 1961.<sup>1</sup> Increases in Extension funds came in areas of national concern, such as expanded nutrition and pesticides. The trend for increased emphasis on accountability will probably continue. Therefore, it demands continued attention.

The term accountability, for the Cooperative Extension Service, means: providing a credible demonstration of accomplishments toward objectives, stated and implied, in the agency's enabling and subsequent legislation. What has Cooperative Extension done up to now to answer the issue of accountability? How might this position be strengthened?

### **What Has Been Done?**

During the past 60 years, Cooperative Extension has developed and perfected its grass-roots educational model. This has probably contributed most to Extension's acceptance and accountability. This model which involves people in identifying local individual needs, and in the planning, development, carrying out, and evaluation of programs to meet these needs has made Cooperative Extension one of the world's largest adult education organizations.

As with any large, dynamic organization, the major problem in maintaining the quality and effectiveness of the organization is management. Although effective management is a responsibility of all professional Extension staff, the responsibility for guidance and leadership in managing the total national organization rests with the federal administrators working closely with the state directors. The latest management theories, tools, and techniques must be incorporated to assure responsiveness and accountability at all organizational levels.

Programs dealing with accountability have developed in all areas of management and are called by different titles — program budgeting, cost effectiveness, zero budgeting. But, the intent of these is similar . . . to develop sound effective programs with results that can be measured, that can prove accountability.

At the federal level, the search for a mechanism to control funds was most visible in the Department of Defense under Secretary Robert

McNamara, in the form of program budgeting. President Johnson expanded this idea to include all agencies of the federal government. Thus, the USDA and its agencies were brought into such a system.<sup>2</sup>

With this action, along with earlier planning, the federal administrators of Extension developed the Extension Management Information System (EMIS) for the total agency, along with its counterpart in each state referred to as SEMIS (State Extension Management Information System). The EMIS/SEMIS concept was "one of the first steps taken to evaluate the effect of government spending, from a management approach."<sup>3</sup>

EMIS/SEMIS, designed by Systems Development Corporation and the Extension Service-USDA, was developed to strengthen the planning, reporting, and evaluating functions of management within the total Extension organization. In SEMIS, the plan of work has certain goals against which the time of staff is accumulated by a computer-based statistical package, and followed up with a final narrative evaluation. SEMIS locks the annual plan of work, the daily recording of time devoted to various Extension efforts (called an activity report), and a final narrative evaluation of progress into one continuous set of steps.

When these data are used in unison, they make a base for administrative and professional decisions in effective Extension programs.<sup>4</sup>

The purpose of the SEMIS sta-

tistical package is to provide for an effective comparison of planned efforts (time) to be expended and actual efforts (time) expended. This system considers the Extension management questions of why, what, when, where, with whom, for whom, how many, how much, and how. It provides the documented quantitative evidence for accountability of government funding.<sup>5</sup>

The accomplishments toward planned objectives, qualitatively evaluated, are recorded by each Extension professional on an annual progress report. Generally, Extension accomplishments are evaluated by some combination of the following measurements: activity of the instructor, opinion of the participants, action of the participants, and/or behavioral change of the participants.

In most situations, staff members prepare the narrative evaluation of their own programs, indicating some measure of acceptance, social change, adoption of practices, reduction of costs, or similar measures of benefit to society.

Integrating these accomplishments into each level of the organization and each public served hasn't been fully achieved yet. But, individual efforts have been helpful in presenting the Extension philosophy to the public. The nature of Extension work often makes actual awareness of change hard to demonstrate. However, accountability requires some measure of the change or lack of change that has taken place.

Extension's proven educational model and the EMIS/SEMIS con-

cept are elements necessary for the accountability of Extension programs. Organizing, applying, and managing this system isn't without its problems and inefficiencies. However, as Extension professionals become more familiar and experienced with the total concept, many of these problems should be minimized.

Through our personal contacts with all levels of Extension personnel directly responsible for planning, reporting, and evaluating, we found a consensus that certain areas need strengthening to fully allow for meaningful program evaluation for accountability.

The following are areas where strengthening would bring the greatest rewards toward improved accountability.

#### **Strengthening Techniques**

The basic rationale needed to support improved accountability is neither new nor untested. The major steps involve putting known management principles into practice. The keystone of SEMIS is the plan of work. This document outlines goals, allocates resources, and suggests methods of measuring achievements. Effective evaluation by management depends on management's ability to determine if the goals or objectives of specific line items have been achieved. Unless these goals have been stated in measurable terms, measurement becomes a futile exercise. The first step in improving the system must be an intensive attempt to increase understanding of the need to write line items in measurable terms.

Narrative progress reports usually provide evaluation of accomplishments in knowledge, skills, and attitudes, as assessed by the staff member responsible for the line item. Achieving successful evaluation hinges on the measurement that the evaluator is able to make.

Presently, the major defect in line item evaluation is that it's largely an account of the methods and techniques applied and not an indication of acceptance of new goals or practices. While reports of this type give the administrator some idea of what was done, they don't indicate achievement of goals.

The data bank of activity reports gives the administrator another measurement tool in addition to the planning time/time reported comparison. This measurement is a standard or average time requirement for achieving a goal. Input-output data are valuable in planning new efforts, projecting manpower requirements, and designing budgets for new programs. The administrator should continue to refine the content of the data bank so he can get the measurement data he needs in the future.

A major advantage of SEMIS is the integration of the plan of work, activity report, and narrative progress report. These directly related documents, from a management standpoint, should be the basis of program review at all levels of Extension. In addition, more effort should be put into articulating to the public what Extension's about, so the public can identify with the programs and understand Extension's mission.

One of the key roles of the management group is to select goals or directions the organization might move toward. This selection takes place within a sphere bounded by the role of the organization, the legal framework on which it's based, and its human and fiscal resources.

Pressures in a fast moving society create needs to assess and reassess the role of the organization in meeting goals desired by Extension's publics. To achieve the maximum number of goals, each change made in resource use should be analyzed to determine its potential contribution and at what expense it's made.

Achieving successful measures of accountability are vital not only to demonstrate success to funding bodies, but to inform staff of progress made within the organization and to guide the internal management of Extension.

#### Footnotes

1. Reports on number of Cooperative Extension agents, Extension Service-USDA, December 31, 1961, and July 31, 1971.
2. Memorandum to the Cabinet, Lyndon B. Johnson, August 25, 1965.
3. *SEMIS Technical Institute Reference Manual* (Washington, D.C.: Extension Service-USDA, 1971), p. 3.
4. EMIS Data Definition, Document FY-73, Section 4 (Washington, D.C.: Extension Service-USDA, 1973), p. 2.
5. *SEMIS Technical Manual*, p. 3.

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