

idea corner

I & R for Learning

As Information and Referral (I&R) systems for learning become more common, cooperation between educational institutions and Extension agents can help satisfy the public's "need to know."

The Kansas Cooperative Extension Service is working with the Division of Continuing Education at Kansas State

University (KSU) to provide such an information and referral system. Called the Kansas Learning Network (KLN), KSU hopes to compile all of the educational opportunities in the state, both formal and informal, in a central file. Any citizen in the state can inquire about these learning opportunities by calling a toll-free number.

I & R systems in education have developed from both institutional and learner needs. Learners are increasingly searching for more learning programs, or the right learning program, rather than taking what is immediately made known or available to them. In rural areas, one problem is finding a program within traveling distance. In urban areas, a problem is that of being unable to discern differences and distinctions between programs. Institutions have also found a need for I & R services. They are attempting to avoid duplication, secure more visibility and publicity, and form cooperative situations where possible. As both learner and institutional needs for I & R continue to grow, an I & R system will become a common entry point in the education of adults.

The Kansas Learning Network is working with Kansas State University and a career information program in the state department of education to construct a file of three kinds of learning opportunities: (1) formal learning, such as community colleges and beauty schools; (2) vocational training, such as apprenticeships and real estate schools; and (3) informal learning opportunities in local communities, such as arts and crafts courses and mental health programs. Instead of a bulky and out-of-date printed directory, KLN is utilizing a toll-free Wats line and publicizing the service in the mass media.

The Kansas Learning Network will complement its central file of information with local referral agents in the

community to provide personal contact and knowledge of people in the area. In addition to receiving referrals from the central office, local referral agents will serve as a source of information and updating of the information files for that particular community. Extension agents have traditionally served as informal referral agents about learning opportunities in the county, helping individuals find both teachers and self-study materials. As I & R becomes more structured and formal, the Extension agent should be one of the first persons asked to serve as a local referral agent. The Extension agent is in a prime position to be aware of educational opportunities in the community, to be able to provide a warm and personal approach to learners seeking information, and also be in contact with the central information bank to find out about area, regional, state, or national sources of information.

The concept of an I & R system for learning opportunities approaches education in its broadest sense, an orientation Extension has always enjoyed. Traditional educational programs such as courses in colleges, vocational-technical schools, and universities are easily compiled and cataloged. The informal non-credit classes, or even independent teachers and tutors such as the garage owner who teaches auto mechanics on Saturday mornings, or the immigrant from northern Europe who knows Norwegian rosemaling, are more challenging learning sources to compile. But they are also the most needed sources of learning.

Every community has a wealth of human resources, as any professional social service worker knows, and that teaching and sharing potential needs to be developed. So the long-range goal of the I & R service in learning is not only to catalog already known sources of education, but to encourage hidden and unknown sources of learning so they

become more visible. In that regard, some learning programs encourage people to share knowledge as well as learn. These include free universities and learning exchanges. They can be helpful models in shaping an I & R service for learning.

The Kansas Learning Network is only beginning to tap the resources of the Cooperative Extension Service. As local referral agents, as knowledgeable

sources of information, as contacts in the community, and as advisors in designing an effective and economical I & R system, Extension agents have much to give, and something to gain, from active involvement in I & R for learning.

WILLIAM DRAVES
*Coordinator, Kansas Learning Network
Division of Continuing Education
Kansas State University, Manhattan*