

# setting program priorities for the 80s

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## Effective Citizen Involvement

Does the program development process currently used in Extension make effective use of citizen involvement in establishing program priorities? This question, not adequately dealt with by the recent national evaluation, must be resolved if the Cooperative Extension Service is to direct its resources toward meeting the most significant needs.<sup>1</sup>

Although greater citizen involvement in decision making may be viewed as a worthy goal, effective involvement of citizens must address two concerns. First, Extension program determination requires a careful interaction of clientele, agents, specialists, supervisors, administrators, and Extension advisory and support groups. Providing such groups the opportunity for continual input to the program determination process helps ensure that programs are effectively balanced between felt needs, emerging problems, and new knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

A second concern is that studies in the area of small-group problem solving clearly indicate that the quality of group decision making is determined primarily by how well the group (such as an Extension program advisory committee) is able to explore the various dimensions of the problem and consider a wide range of possible solutions.

According to the research, it's not enough to rely entirely on the experiences and knowledge of people in the planning group in defining problems and identifying realistic solutions. Some background information must be provided so citizens can use it to analyze situations and identify gaps or imbalances.<sup>3</sup> Boyle contends that research to date indicates that continuing education programmers don't perform this function as well as they might.<sup>4</sup>

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One procedure for developing background information on problems and needs of clientele is described as "formal needs assessment." While needs assessments aren't new to the Extension program development process, systematic processes for identifying needs and setting priorities haven't been widely circulated. As such, county Extension agents interested in conducting needs assessment surveys often don't know what results to expect from such a survey nor the amount of time required to conduct one.

The purpose of this report is to share recent experiences of an urban county Extension staff in preparing for a needs assessment survey. The survey was conducted in Cuyahoga County (Cleveland), Ohio.

**Reason  
for Survey**

As the county staff worked with the County Extension Advisory Committee in fall, 1979, to support increased budget requests simply to maintain existing staff, program, and facilities, it became apparent that a more focused view of appropriate program emphasis in the 80s was needed. For an excellent County Extension Advisory Committee like the one in Cuyahoga County to realize its potential for service to Extension and ultimately the citizenry of the county, more comprehensive information about program trends and opportunities, delivery systems, population shifts, professional and nonprofessional staff possibilities, and cost projections for a variety of program options was vitally needed.

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We consulted the 15-member group on how best to develop a stronger base for program determination and concomitant essential financial support. Cuyahoga County's committee is comprised totally of people from the private sector who are geographically scattered. They represent a broad spectrum of experience in such fields as personnel, law, marketing, public relations, social service, and agribusiness. Most had conducted similar projects in their own areas of responsibility and were willing to share ways to evaluate the many-faceted mission of Extension.

The first obvious need was for systematic clientele input. In other words, the committee wanted to know the reactions and viewpoints of existing clientele. The committee suggested types of needed input, but clearly indicated its role to be one of examining the data, not collecting it.

### **Preparing for Survey**

A timely agent in-service seminar offered training in the use of various needs assessment tools. Several were considered for Cuyahoga County, including mail surveys to clientele (eliminated because of high cost and low return rate) and random sample of the county population (ruled out because it's too expensive to reach a significant number of metro county population for meaningful response).

After meeting with the Extension leader of evaluation, the agents decided on a two-pronged approach. First, a random sample telephone survey of 10% (150 names) of the horticulture and 5% (300 names) of the home economics newsletter mailing lists would be selected to make a total sample of 450 people. These lists were chosen as the largest current source of contacts in some way qualified to respond (the lists are updated annually as required of penalty mail users). In addition, the survey could include questions about the quality and usefulness of the Extension newsletters. Second, agents would interview "top" community leaders as identified by the advisory committee and the county commissioners regarding their views on the major problems to be faced by county residents in the 80s.

The entire project had to be sandwiched into an already fully committed agent workload, so ample time was allowed for its completion. Over a four-month period, appropriate telephone survey questions were developed for home economics and horticulture newsletter recipients. A cadre of 35 volunteers and staff were trained in a 1-day workshop to conduct the telephone interviews during one month. The questions were carefully prepared so that many callers could work with them, yet, produce usable results. Each caller was asked to complete 10 surveys within 4 weeks, but most would have handled more. A few volunteers offered to make additional calls once they'd completed the initial assignment.

All 450 surveys were successfully completed and tabulated within the next 2 months. Agents also interviewed the community leaders at that time. During the eighth and ninth month, the data were sent to the Extension leader of evaluation for computer processing and data analysis. On November, 14, 1980, a formal report was presented to key leaders, legislators, public officials, and Extension administrators during a breakfast meeting at a downtown hotel.

## Results

Here are some selected findings and a description of how they were useful in decisions concerning program development and budget requests:

1. Over 79% of the Homemakers Club members don't have children at home and the membership is in the senior category. Emphasis for future activities has changed dramatically to meet special needs of older citizens. In addition, renewed emphasis has been placed on recruitment of younger members.
2. Over 54% of the sample had phoned the Extension office for information. A supplemental budget request was made to county commissioners for a dial-access telephone answering system. The request was based on the findings of this survey with the point that the necessity to provide immediate answers to many people at a minimum expense can be met by such a system.

At the same time, the Better Business Bureau and the Poison Information Center expressed a need for improved information delivery to consumers. County Commissioner Edward Feighan then asked the Cleveland Foundation to convene a meeting of the interested parties to explore ways to establish a multiagency automated telephone information system. Although that meeting has yet to be scheduled, the outlook for the project is promising.

3. Over 90% use information contained in the home economics newsletter, while 72% share the newsletter with relatives, friends, and neighbors. This and other findings serve as a guide in selecting articles for the newsletter and in program development.

## Conclusions and Implications

As with most ambitious ventures, those who undertake the work gain the most. For example, all the agents learned to phrase questions to enable responses to be aggregated easily. Using a questionnaire designed for telephone interviews makes data collection a less expensive and relatively efficient use of time. Dillman's Total Design Method<sup>5</sup> provided an excellent guide. Also, these activities and experiences have helped build our confidence in stepping up our evaluation efforts with ongoing programs.

Contacts made with community leaders have been surprisingly fruitful in opening new doors to innovative programming. We discovered that the leaders identified by both the committee and the county officials weren't necessarily

those perceived by the Extension staff to be the county's top leaders before the survey, even though the county Extension program had been involved with urban audiences for several decades.

On a personal note, it was gratifying to find that no matter who did the interviewing, there were many positive comments from clientele about the quality of Extension education received and its value to them personally (a real morale booster in these difficult times).

In conclusion, this initial survey provided audience-specific data that proved useful both in program development and in the formation of this year's county budget request and subsequent approval at an acceptable level. It's just the beginning of a comprehensive effort to ensure appropriate emphasis on county Extension programs in Cuyahoga County, Ohio.

### Footnotes

1. Maynard C. Heckel, "National Evaluation of Extension: Issues and Opportunities," *Journal of Extension*, XIX (May/June, 1981), 6-10.
2. Report of the Program Development Ad Hoc Committee, "Extension Program Development and Its Relationship to Extension Management Information Systems" (Ames: Iowa State University, Cooperative Extension Service, 1974).
3. Patrick G. Boyle, *Planning Better Programs* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1981).
4. Patrick G. Boyle, *The Program Planning Processes with Emphasis on Extension*, NAECAS, Publication No. 24 (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1961).
5. Don A. Dillman, *Mail and Telephone Surveys: The Total Design Method* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1978).