

forum

Barbara Taylor
Associate Professor and
Extension Family
Environment Specialist

William Summerhill
Associate Professor and
Extension Program
Specialist

Clifton Taylor
Associate Professor and
Extension Program
Specialist

University of Florida—
Gainesville

Meeting the Accountability Challenge. Why does accountability to local government for educational programs present such a challenge to many Extension agents? Perhaps it's because we've overlooked one of the most critical steps in this process.

Typically, in accountability we've focused almost entirely on the *post-program* collection and analysis of data delineating consequences of educational efforts. However, with the current scarcity of funds, we can't afford the luxury of waiting until programs are completed to provide accountability information.

Extension agents are increasingly finding themselves in situations where, as a basis for funding, key decision makers are demanding that we provide a defensible program rationale and evidence of planning that would indicate a high degree of assurance of accomplishment. This demand for *preprogram* accountability is difficult to meet if we're unprepared. And, finding ourselves in this predicament, we're often unable to provide more than a simple delineation of educational activities, which isn't enough for program justification.

To effectively meet the *preprogram* accountability challenge, we must develop a logical, concise program rationale that provides a clear picture of clientele needs and assurances that the program will address that need and accomplish its intended mission. As we see it, it's critical that such a rationale include four fundamental components.

The first is a clear delineation of the current status of the audience for which the program is targeted. Second is a thorough assessment of the realistic potential for that audience. Third is an accurate determination of the economic and/or social significance of the audience reaching that potential. And, fourth, is a sound program design for providing information needed by the target audience to achieve the projected outcomes.

It should be noted here that implicit in this rationale development is the involvement of the clientele, subject specialists, and other appropriate resources in the careful examination of relevant data, the establishment of program priorities, and the development of strategies for program accomplishment.

The *preprogram* accountability challenge can be met! Although meeting it may not always assure the desired budgetary outcomes, the sound rationale developed through careful attention to the fundamental components indicated will contribute significantly to the stature of the Extension organization, as well as provide the foundation for achieving programmatic excellence.