



**April 2011**  
**Volume 49 Number 2**  
**Article Number 2TOT1**

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## **Best Practices for Extension Curricula Review**

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**Abstract:** Effective curricula are a cornerstone of successful Extension programming. The National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) Nutrition and Health Planning and Guidance Committee (NGPGC) developed a set of recommendations for a curriculum review system and created a curriculum review checklist. The checklist describes components of an effective curriculum as well as specific items reviewers should access related to content, readability, and utility.

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## **Introduction**

Effective curricula are a cornerstone of successful Extension programming. Developing or selecting a curriculum that is effective and likely to meet the target audience's needs is a challenging and important task of specialists and agents. Studies indicate that curricula developers and reviewers may not always use a comprehensive, systematic process that evaluates the full array of factors that determine whether a curriculum is likely to have its intended impact (Betterley & Dobson, 2000; Mercer, 1998; Tagtow & Amos, 2000).

A recent survey of Extension specialists working in the food, nutrition, and/or health areas, conducted by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) Nutrition and Health Planning and Guidance Committee (NHPGC) <[http://www.csrees.usda.gov/nea/food/in\\_focus/nutrition\\_if\\_nutrition\\_health\\_committee.html](http://www.csrees.usda.gov/nea/food/in_focus/nutrition_if_nutrition_health_committee.html)>, revealed that curricula review processes vary widely across Extension (Purcell et al., 2010). Variations ranged from having a review process to not having a review process to being unaware of whether the state had a curriculum review process. Of those reporting their states had review processes, curriculum development and selection criteria ranged from very broad to highly detailed. Survey results indicated a clear need for an easy-to-use, comprehensive tool that describes the components of high-quality curricula.

In response to this need, the NHPGC's Curriculum subcommittee, comprised of state leaders and specialists (n=4), who have extensive experience developing, implementing, evaluating, and selecting Extension nutrition and health curricula, developed a set of recommendations for a curriculum review system and created a curriculum review checklist with input from the NHPGC and an additional curriculum specialist. The recommendations and checklist are based on best practices gleaned from state Extension systems identified through the survey and expert opinion of the NHPGC Curriculum subcommittee.

States interested in improving their curricula review process are encouraged to consider these recommendations. An effective curricula review system is one that:

- Has a documented review process.
- Is easy to understand.
- Is easy for Extension faculty and staff to access and use.
- Includes a peer review process where reviewers have expertise in subject matter, learning theory, and the audience for whom the curriculum is intended.
- Evaluates curricula based on clearly articulated standards of content, readability, utility, and intended outcomes.

The following curriculum review checklist delineates the qualities of an effective, high-quality curriculum.

## **Extension Curriculum Review List**

### **1. Content**

- Is based on current education and behavioral change theory and research. The theoretical underpinnings of the curriculum are described.
- Is accurate, current, and research-based.
- Presents a balanced view of the topic, recognizing any aspects that are not yet clearly understood or open to debate.

- Includes clear, measurable learning and behavioral objectives. Objectives are clearly linked to theoretical underpinnings.
- Identifies the intended target audience and is appropriate for this audience.
- Builds on the strengths/assets, needs, and interests of learners. Audience input was used to guide development of materials.
- Actively engages the audience in the learning process and promotes behavior change.
- Reflects the diversity of the target audience. Includes multilingual handouts and educational reinforcements when appropriate.
- Ideas and principles included in the curriculum respect all aspects of diversity.
- Is linked to education standards/benchmarks when taught in a K-12 school setting.

## 2. Readability

- Uses language and vocabulary appropriate for the target audience.
- Is written at the appropriate reading level for the intended audience.
- Is logically and sequentially organized.
- Handouts or similar support materials are visually appealing and aid reader comprehension (e.g., adequate white space, appropriate font).

## 3. Utility

- Includes all the materials and information needed for implementing the lessons, Information is provided for acquiring support materials that are necessary but not included with the curriculum such as food models, stretch bands, or story books. Includes class preparation guidelines, such as tips for advance preparation lessons.
- Instructions are easy to understand and follow.

- Includes appropriate credit for non-original material, references, and additional resources and information.
- Has been peer-reviewed.
- Has been pilot tested and refined.
- Any activities, including recipes, used to reinforce the educational messages are safe and practical to implement.
- Other relevant resources are included, such as audiovisuals and websites.
- Source and author are clearly and appropriately cited.
- Includes a logic model or other appropriate programming planning and outcomes model.
- Includes publication date.
- Describes the process for implementing the curriculum (e.g., for process evaluation to ascertain fidelity of implementation).

#### **4. Evaluation**

- Includes evaluations (e.g., checklists, questionnaires, observational instruments) that have been cognitively tested and field tested, and demonstrate acceptable psychometric properties.
- Evaluation methods and items are clearly linked to learning objectives.
- Evaluations include those designed to be administered prior to implementing the curriculum, those that are designed to be administered at key points during implementation, and those designed to be administered at the end of the implementation (e.g., pre-tests, tests during implementation, post-tests, and follow-up tests) as appropriate so that effectiveness can be established and reported.

### **Conclusion**

Curricula are an essential tool in every Extension educator's toolbox. A review system used to evaluate curricula against clearly articulated standards of content, readability, utility, and intended outcomes can be a useful tool in the development of effective curricula. We urge Extension professionals who have a curriculum-related role in their state to share the article with colleagues, engage them in dialog about their existing curriculum process and criteria, and seek ways to improve their systems. The NHPGC Curriculum

subcommittee welcomes feedback on this important issue!

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