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Creating New Program Opportunities with Specialized Staff

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Abstract: Extension will continue to face many changes in the future. Successful staffing models will help Extension position itself for sustainability and growth. Aligning staff with their strengths is essential for success of new staffing plans. Staff can use their strengths to provide success program design and implementation. Staff in new roles will also need to collaborate in program development and offerings to assure the public and stakeholders that new models are sustaining.

As the Cooperative Extension System moves into the second decade of the 21st century and continues look at the relevance of Extension programming to meet the needs of today's citizens, Extension is being asked to review its practices and target programs that demonstrate impact and outcomes. The global economy will also affect the way Extension does business (Harriman & Daugherty, 1992). The University of Minnesota Center for Youth Development decided to review its staff structure and create a new delivery to ensure quality programs. Field staff were given a survey to indicate areas of work interest. Once the data

was collected, leadership reviewed the information, and staff applied for a specialized position. Positions included: Regional Program, Educational Design and Development, Volunteer and Partnership Development, and Program Evaluation.

A work team, comprised of the four new positions and state staff, was created to develop and test a new program delivery using the new staffing model. In addition to coordination among disciplines, there is a need for campus faculty and, increasingly, field staff to integrate their Extension activities (Bitsch & Thornsby, 2010). Targeting the state and national initiative 4-H Sciences, a new program was piloted in the state of Minnesota. Throughout the summer the team met and looked at opportunities to tie in cross-program efforts in aquatic-based Robotics and watershed science education using the SeaPerch ROV (remote operated vehicle) program developed by the MIT Sea Grant program and offered through the Office of Naval Research.

Background

The Minnesota Sea Grant states that "Minnesota, known as the land of 10,000 lakes, is really the land of over 12,000 lakes, an inland sea, 10.6 million acres of wetlands, the headwaters of the Mississippi, 69,200 miles of natural rivers and streams, and drinkable groundwater."

Minnesota has three major continental divide drainage basins, Hudson Bay, the Atlantic Ocean, and the Gulf of Mexico. In northwestern Minnesota, water flows north and drains into Hudson Bay. The water in northeastern Minnesota flows east into Lake Superior and ultimately into the Atlantic Ocean. South flowing water drains into the Mississippi River and eventually reaches the Gulf of Mexico. Water quality practices in Minnesota have significant national and international consequences.

Creating the Program

Extension educators in specialized positions have come together to address the issue of water quality in Minnesota. Such changes certainly expand Extension's ability to provide solutions to a wide range of complex problems while reducing costs and maintaining quality (Torppa & Smith, 2009). By using ROV engineering concepts, youth can study and measure water quality in Minnesota. This opportunity fulfills work and focus on the national mission mandates of Science, Engineering and Technology, Healthy Lifestyle and Citizenship.

The team recruited state faculty and the Minnesota 4-H Foundation director. These new members provided showcasing and funding opportunities for the launch of the program. Staff led field pilots to test the Seaperch. The first pilot was a 4-H camp with 100 3rd – 6th grade participants. The second pilot was a training delivered to three counties in a regional format. After successful pilots and the new partnerships it was decided to showcase this new opportunity at the Minnesota State Fair and to conduct trainings in the spring of 2011.

Growth Opportunities

With the participation of the Minnesota 4-H Foundation, the team was able to work with funds to enhance the learning experience at the Minnesota State Fair. This included securing two large pools to showcase the SeaPerch. The project has secured funding to create regional water quality educational kits and the Office of Naval Research through it's Society of Naval Architects and Marine Engineers has agreed to fund start up program costs and a longitudinal study of program impacts.

This type of collaboration between field faculty, state faculty external partners and the foundation director has created a new vision and implementation of the program development.

The Future

The future for this team and developing this new program is exciting. This team held successful and educational local and state experiences. After evaluating the experiences, a 5-year statewide plan with new partners is being created for growth of new members, clubs, and new volunteers. With the resources in Minnesota, participants will be able to learn about the water in their area and how to educate others.

The team has been working on developing the program with the use of a logic model. There are many aspects of the program that will need to be developed. One key component is funding for an additional staff person to help with the mechanics of delivering it statewide. This funding will help support trained youth and volunteers and staff as counties and regions participate.

Another element to the success of the program is the creation of state and local leadership teams. These teams will be composed of youth, adult volunteers, Extension faculty and staff, and external watershed resource partners. This kind of leadership team will continue to evolve the vision of the program, which will help in continued growth and sustainability.

Conclusion

Utilizing the different skills of each of the Extension educators and state and foundation staff provided for a distinct educational program. This collaboration provides a solid foundation for program development. It also gives purpose for each individual on the team.

This new structure gives staff the opportunity to use their new roles in a variety of ways. The team found new meaning in their work, which was a real benefit for the staff involved as well as the development of the program. This also gave the staff focus and the ability to provide quality resources to the participants.

Because of the challenges Extension is facing across the country, work teams need to ensure that members of their teams can bring their areas of focus. This will provide productive work teams to address the needs of the citizens in local communities.

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